

Finding Religion: The Legacy of the Christ-haunted South in Harry Crews' *A Feast of Snakes*

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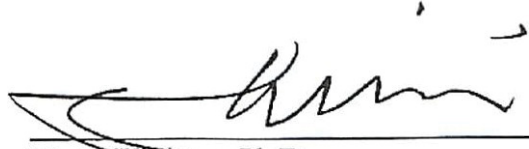
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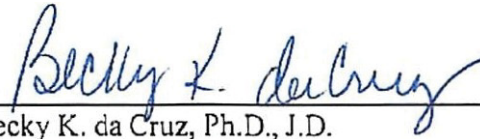


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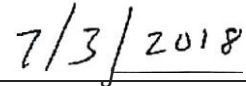
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ABSTRACT

My thesis proposes that Flannery O'Connor's character the Misfit of the story "A Good Man is Hard to Find" and Joe Lon Mackey, the protagonist of Harry Crews' novel *A Feast of Snakes* (1976), share a significant connection that manifests from their upbringing in what O'Connor calls the "Christ-haunted South." This thesis attempts to create a working interpretation of O'Connor's phrase "Christ-haunted South" and juxtapose it against the "Christ-centered" alternative. By defining these terms and using Luke Ferretter's work *Towards a Christian Literary Theory* as a guide, it intends to explore the texts' Christian elements to facilitate a better understanding of the culture in which the stories take place and offer instructive criticisms of Christian communities, especially those that have reduced Christianity to mere ideology or spectacle. Specifically, it seeks to establish the Misfit's struggle as a prototype of the Southern man who exposes the negative ramifications of the "Christ-haunted South." Furthermore, it examines similar religious implications in *A Feast of Snakes*, and it suggests that Joe Lon struggles, like the Misfit, to obtain any type of transcendence in the "Christ-haunted" South. This alternative analysis reveals a gap in the current criticism of this text by highlighting the significance of Christian undertones in the novel. Thus, it expressly acknowledges that religion is an integral component of Southern culture and should therefore be addressed in the criticism of its literature, and it implies the need for the examinations of the breadth and depth of theological tropes in modern American literature as a whole.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The Misfit is one of Flannery O'Connor's most complex and intriguing characters. An escaped convict with vying nihilist and theological musings, the Misfit determines that if Christ's resurrection is a fallacy, the only source of "pleasure" is "meanness" (*Complete Stories* 132). He orders the killings of a father, mother, two children, and a baby, and he shoots the grandmother at point blank range in the last pages of the much-critiqued short story "A Good Man is Hard to Find." Joe Lon Mackey, the beleaguered protagonist of Harry Crews' novel *A Feast of Snakes* (1976), finds no pleasure in life, through meanness or otherwise. In the last pages of Crews' tale, Joe Lon, in a delusional attempt to regain control of his life, shotgun blasts four people before succumbing to his own demise. On the surface, these two characters appear to share very little in common other than being Georgia boys with a penchant for violence. However, I propose the Misfit and Joe Lon share a significant connection that manifests from their upbringing in what O'Connor calls the "Christ-haunted South." In this environment, the Misfit and Joe Lon suffer because their respective communities are unable to satisfactorily address their inward struggles, and, subsequently, stifle their yearning for personal transcendence.

Both O'Connor and Crews' work displays the Southerner's preoccupation with man's limitedness, his inability to attain perfection, and the weight of damnation in this life or after. O'Connor's deeply held religious convictions were no secret, and her

Southern Gothic stories, while riddled with elements of the grotesque and acts of despicable violence, are also endowed with moments of grace and redemption. On the contrary, Crews' work, while immersed with freaks and debauchery, often appears devoid of any merciful ideology or specific doctrinal dogma. Still, the writings of both authors reflect what Fred Hobson notes as more characteristic of the Southern writer: "a greater attention to the past, an acceptance of man's finiteness, his penchant for failure, [and] a tragic sense" (3).

A devout Catholic, O'Connor found an abundance of writing material by exploring the dichotomy of the Protestant South's deep sense of religiosity and its shallow understanding of the depth of grace offered in the Gospel message of Jesus Christ. Accordingly, she makes a case that the Southern community is still bound to its Christian heritage, and it consequently spills over into the region's fiction:

But approaching the subject from the standpoint of the writer, I think it is safe to say that while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted. The Southerner, who isn't convinced of it, is very much afraid that he may have been formed in the image and likeness of God. Ghosts can be very fierce and instructive. They cast strange shadows, particularly in our literature.

(Mystery and Manners 44-5)

In order to consider the analytical implications of this statement, it is important to first create a working interpretation of O'Connor's phrase "Christ-haunted South" and then juxtapose it against the "Christ-centered" alternative in order to explore the potential causes of the Misfit's and Joe Lon's disconnection from their respective communities. In the most simplistic terms, Christ-haunted refers to the remnants of Christian morality

evident in society, the lack of spiritual depth with regards to the Christian faith in the individuals within that society, the hypocritical behavior that often stems from that disconnection, yet, ironically, the inability to disregard the basic doctrine of Christianity in its entirety. To begin, I will examine the characteristics of the South as O'Connor claims it to be: *Christ-haunted*.

In O'Connor's Christ-haunted South, most people have a general knowledge of the Bible. This basic biblical understanding might include familiarity with the Ten Commandments, the more popular Old Testament accounts such as those of Noah, Moses, and David, and the Gospel account of the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. With some variation, this common knowledge transcends socioeconomic and denominational boundaries. O'Connor noted that among Catholics, predominantly the educated read the Bible, "but in the South the Bible is known by the ignorant as well" (MM 203). While perhaps crudely stated, O'Connor's point appears to be that this religious bond uniquely connects the people of the South in a way that class and education often divides communities. This general knowledge of the Bible, however, serves more as a cultural backdrop or gauge of morality than a text worthy of study and devotion. In her assessment, O'Connor acknowledged that while "the Bible is held sacred," she doubted the Southerner's overall commitment to living out its teachings and believed: "because we are not totally dependent on [the Bible], it has not penetrated very far into our consciousness nor conditioned our reactions to experience" (MM 203). In other words, the South is Christ-haunted because their biblical knowledge operates on the perimeter of their daily lives rather than as a vital influence that reliably and consistently impacts their thoughts and interactions. It may be safe to assume, then, that the Bible

would be *central* in a Christ-centered South, and as a result, the people would live their lives and interact with one another in a manner that evidences an outward manifestation motivated by the inward spiritual transformation from its teachings.

Instead, O'Connor was all too aware that the South often equated its sense of civility and manners to that of religious ritual. Practicing such outward etiquette can be mistakenly equated with inward goodness. An example of this is in the interaction between the Misfit and the grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find." Robert Coles writes that the story is O'Connor's "effort to show, dramatically, how encrusted most of us are in (deathly) secular pieties" and how they are "challenged by the arrival of a Bible-haunted 'Misfit'" (105-6). In this way, O'Connor is like the Misfit: she challenges her readers, Southerners in particular, to examine themselves through the actions of characters like the grandmother and the mannerisms of the Misfit. For O'Connor, the often negative depictions of the Southern communities in her stories were not for sport, but rather a call to recognize the need for grace and thereby engender hope for change. After all, O'Connor believed these cultural practices of spiritual superficiality were not minor infractions or annoyances but grave matters of life and death.

As modernist ideas spread, traditional beliefs such as that of God as sovereign creator were called into question, and in the quest for life's meaning, answer sources such as man's intellect and self-sufficiency along with advancements in science started to overshadow the conventional teachings of Christianity. Still, as O'Connor observes, those established religious beliefs are so engrained that the Southerner who denies them remains fearful that he is, in fact, a created being "in the image and likeness of God" (MM 45). Thus, she concludes these "fierce and instructive" ghosts that haunt southern

culture point out the pitfalls of a Christ-haunted culture and, by their presence, suggest a more Christ-centered existence.

In “A Good Man is Hard to Find” and *A Feast of Snakes*, these “ghosts” give instruction in several ways. First, they serve as a reminder of the foundations of Christian theology that contextualize the “Christ-haunted” South: God created man; original sin condemned all men; Christ was crucified to be the propitiation for the sins of humanity and the defeat of death, so that by grace, humankind may receive forgiveness, restore a relationship with God, and have life eternal in his presence. Secondly, the ghosts reveal spiritual deficiency and the need for salvation in both characters and communities. Thirdly, they warn of the imminence and certainty of death and that rejection of Christ and God’s grace in this life brings judgment and eternal separation from God in the afterlife.

Exploring the ways in which these religious “ghosts” blatantly impact the Misfit aids in the discovery of similar “ghosts” in *A Feast of Snakes* and their influence on Joe Lon and the community of Mystic. This exploration fosters an alternative approach to the naturalist and deterministic criticism often used to analyze Crews’ work and acknowledges the significance of the South’s religious component in the genre of Southern literature and the Southern culture at large. In his book *Writing the South*, Richard Gray notes that the power of Southern writing:

. . . depends on a single-minded almost obsessive dissection of the human animal’s claim to authority and status, a stripping-away of his pretensions and, to some extent, even his dignity. And it also relies on the reader’s feeling that this unnerving process is performed, not for sensationalism’s sake, but in the service

of a vision that approaches the religious—which is to say in the name of three things: a sense of moral displacement, a fear of pride and abstraction, and a belief in something—force, fate, environment, or whatever—that lies beyond the human capacity to know or control. (186)

With disciplined effort, O'Connor and Crews tap into that power of Southern writing.

While hardly overtly religious in the manner of the Misfit's dialogue with the grandmother, Joe Lon's pretensions and dignity are stripped away, and his quest to know what "ails him" is an effort to cure his inward turmoil so that he can change what currently appears to be beyond what he can know and control.

It is true that most critics have steered away from looking at Crews' *A Feast of Snakes* with any significant spiritual interrogation. However, Crews said of his work, "I have no book that does not in some way concern itself with man's relationship to God. That's my own judgement. Somebody else can say something else. But I am a believer" (qtd. in Bledsoe 113). For the most part, the critics *have* said something else. His dark fiction with its forlorn characters embroiled in brutal battles for survival lures critics to look through a naturalist lens to account for their suffering and despair. Certainly, *A Feast of Snake's* severity in its portrayal of its subjects and the conspicuously absent elements of hope and grace stand in direct opposition to the accepted tenets of Christian theology. Still, in the Southern context, Crews' work opens itself to an exploration of its spiritual elements. By opening that door, and looking at *A Feast of Snakes* and Joe Lon specifically, from the perspective of man's relationship with God, this thesis seeks to fill in a gap in the criticism of this text. In doing so, it also seeks to give a comprehensive

present view of the South and with respect to religion and the consequences of the breakdown and/or dysfunction of that relationship.

While the objective of this thesis is to highlight the essence of religion in the south and its impact on the region and its inhabitants, it does not discount that America's inception was rooted, in part, in the cause for religious freedom, and it recognizes that religion still factors prominently in American culture as a whole. It contends, however, that interest in and involvement with religion in society is not commensurate with academic American literature criticism. In 1995, Jenny Franchot questioned the paradox of society's very vocal religious discourse at that time versus the silence of religious scholarship in American literary studies: "We are rich in studies that foreground gender, race, and, to a lesser extent, ethnicity and class. But where is religion? Why so invisible?" (834). In an attempt to answer her own questions, Franchot first cites that there is a legitimate fear that dogma can quickly turn to persecution. Therefore, in order to combat religion's potential abusive overreach, literary criticism replaced liberal humanism with Marxist politics. Ironically, this movement led to the relegation of "institutionalized religion and the more private regions of the 'interior life' as naïve unless those regions are subordinate to the domain of linguistic representations or the critiques of [Karl] Marx, [Frederick] Nietzsche, [Sigmund] Freud, and [Michel] Foucault" (834). As a result, religion loses its relevance in light of such poststructuralist criticism.

Furthermore, Franchot argues that Foucault's, along with Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jacques Derrida's declarations of "the death of God," erroneously condemned the inner spirituality of man to death as well (835). Hence, literary critics have been

unwilling to acknowledge that spiritual concerns can be part of their intellectual discourses and have all but dismissed the possibility of meaningfully analyzing spirituality on its own terms in literature. She counters their dismissal by arguing that the recognition and examination of the interior life which is “marked by concerns for the sacred, the soul, creedal affiliation and disaffiliation, theological tradition, ritual behavior, and ceremonialized expression” can actually enhance their discourses (836). Franchot concludes that the academic conversation is diminished because of its privileging of post-metaphysical discourses: “We have allowed these perspectives to provide a detour around America’s engagement with ‘invisibles,’ and in so doing we have allowed ourselves to become ignorant” (842). In an effort to combat such ignorance and reengage with “invisibles,” this thesis, specifically through Joe Lon’s character, explores the interior life “as represented not by the subject but by the person” and thereby affirms critical considerations of mystery, conscience, and the possibility of transcendence (836).

In a collection of essays entitled *Invisible Conversations: Religion in the Literature of America*, edited by Roger Lundin, numerous academics explore religion’s role, past and present, and attempt to answer its relevance, or argue its insignificance, in the study of American literature. In the introduction, Lundin seems to pick up Franchot’s torch and claims the purpose of this collaboration is “an effort to dispel such ignorance” that stems from the absence of academic conversation regarding religious expression in American literature (2). Like the marginalized Other in society, religion and spirituality never completely disappear in American literature. Lundin insists that “polyphonic play has long marked the religious and cultural life of the United States, just as it continues to

animate conversations our literature carries on in the presence of the Invisible or in the shadows cast by its absence” (15). In his essay “American Literature and/as Spiritual Inquiry,” Lawrence Buell echoes both Lundin and O’Connor by stating, “As for American narrative, a case can be made for it being either haunted by religion or insulated from it” (Lundin 39). Therefore, it is important to note those same terms found in O’Connor’s quote: “shadows” and “haunted.” It would seem the consensus concludes whether wanted or not, needed or not, overt or not, significant or not, religion is present in American literature. In the case of these texts, the institution of religion, specifically Christianity, impacts the interior life of the Misfit and Joe Lon and begs for exploration. However, the collection’s points of contention circulate around the ways religion is academically explored or ignored in the aftermath of criticism’s postmodern trends.

Conversely, in his book, *Towards a Christian Literary Theory*, Luke Ferretter seeks to legitimize and lay out Christian theoretical critical lens within the context of prevalent trends in literary criticism discourse. While acknowledging “Christian doctrine is determined by the community in which it is formulated” and that his “is determined by the Roman Catholic community within which [he] writes,” Ferretter asserts that for his intents and purposes “‘Christian’ doctrines [are] those Catholic doctrines from which the major Protestant confessions and the Eastern Orthodox communions do not dissent” (3). By defining literary criticism as “discourse concerned with texts in general, and in particular with the nature and function of literary texts,” Ferretter proposes a Christian literary theory that is concerned with “the nature and function of fictional texts found valuable” based on the fundamental doctrinal commonality aforementioned (4). He advances the theory by arguing against the current contemporary literary and cultural

theory's repudiation of the "truth claim and value of Christian theology," analyzing the significance of deconstruction, Marxism, and psychoanalysis, demonstrating how some of their aspects can be included in Christian literary theory, and evaluating classic hermeneutic practices as a way to confirm Christian literary theory. In his final chapters, Ferretter examines existing theological interpretations of various genres of literary texts and "assesses which of their principles and practices" correlate best with his vision of a Christian literary theory (5). Thus, he formulates a Christian literary theory while attempting to legitimize such a theory in the arena of contemporary literary theory.

Ferretter's in-depth examination of the history of hermeneutics creates the foundation for his claim that its modes applied to some contemporary literary criticism can inform a Christian literary theory "based upon an interpretation of the Biblical text" (100). Ferretter begins his study with analyzing the notion of prejudice in interpretation. Basing his assertions on the works of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Martin Heidegger, he observes that "understanding is not fundamentally something that a human being achieves . . . but rather something he is already engaged in, simply by virtue of being human" (101). Therefore, the interpreter of a text is said to be prejudiced based on his preconceived notions, which stem from his experiences. Before the Enlightenment, however, Ferretter asserts that prejudice did not carry the negative connotation that it does today, and he believes that "the Enlightenment's demand that the interpreter should reject all prejudices is itself based on a prejudice" (103). Authority and tradition also came under attack during the Enlightenment, further alienating Christianity and its acceptance of "the Bible and the church's interpretation of it as authoritative" (107).

However, Ferretter deduces that literary criticism, in turn, operates according to its biased understanding of Christianity which are formed by its own authoritative traditions:

Christian literary theory, that is, is not an irrational or unethical concept in postmodern culture, as that culture would seem to suggest, since the prejudices which determine it are precisely the same kind as those which determine all literary theory whatever [sic]. (108)

Therefore, Christian literary theory is subject to “finding” those textual elements that are more or less contrived in order to support concurring ideological beliefs that fit the narrative desired. Thus, just as it is done in other modes of theory, its discourses should be evaluated for such pitfalls in an effort to eliminate them. That being the case, this thesis attempts to highlight existing religious elements in the texts rather than invent them where they do not exist.

Along those same lines, Ferretter explains that Paul Ricoeur’s “theory of discourse constitutes a basis on which the Christian belief in the truth-claim of the Scriptures can be justified against post-structuralist theories of the text” (124). Ricoeur argues that language operates as a discourse within a specific situation, and when applied to biblical texts, a reader understands them as such by “appropriating their meaning in his own situation . . . and it is at this level . . . that his or her choice to believe in their truth-claim can be understood” (124). Accordingly, Ferretter acknowledges the duality of experiences in the world in which we live and the world of the literary text that we encounter when reading, and as those worlds merge, comprehension of the literary text “further[s] one’s self-understanding” (125). Similarly, Ricoeur notes the idea of extrapolating the value of a text based on the new experiences it offers in correlation with

the reader's preexisting experiences can be applied to the Bible. Ferretter asserts that the Bible's claims, like other literary works, "[open] up a new world to the reader," but the biblical text differentiates itself "as it claims that this world constitutes not only a new experience but the ground of the world of the reader's experience as a whole" (139).

Thus, this assertion allows the Bible to be the basis by which some literary texts may be interpreted. With this in mind, and due to the Christian elements within "A Good Man is Hard to Find" and *A Feast of Snakes*, the Bible may be used to interpret the characters' words and actions in those texts where relevant.

Interpretation does not happen in a vacuum, however. Citing Stanley Fish's numerous essays on the definition and function of "interpretive communities," Ferretter claims that the Christian community is no less capable of literary criticism than contemporary literary critical interpretive communities. Noting that all communities interpret based on specific principles at the exclusion of others, Christianity acts in the same way, including what it determines as articles of faith—or in other words, what that community determines as truth (138). Therefore, it should be possible to construct a responsive and academically responsible Christian-informed hermeneutic approach to literary criticism for a Christian community of readers. When examining the Christian communities within the literary texts, the reader can determine what truths the characters espouse based on their words and actions, and the reader can then critique those truths in comparison the Christian communities of the actual world in a type of reader-response.

Continuing with the idea of Christianity as an interpretive community, Ferretter summarizes works by contemporary scholars who have engaged in the argument that the Christian theological perspective is valid. Specifically, Robert Detweiler's work in

Breaking the Fall: Religious Readings of Contemporary Fiction is particularly appropriate for the purpose of this thesis. By viewing religion as a cultural system that seeks to make order from potential chaos by the use of myths and rituals, Detweiler sees the religious reading of a text functioning in the same way: “a reader understands herself as part of a community engaged in simultaneously recognizing, criticizing, and shaping the rituals it lives by” (38). Religious response to a text seeks out the dimensions of festival that both control and increase excess and notes the connection between festival and ritual. Similar to carnival, a break from the norm, festivals “function as release, as the letting-go of energies and tensions accumulated” for self-identified communities (40). That connection is especially applicable in *A Feast of Snakes* where ritual is intertwined with festival if not completely replaced by it, and the raucous behavior is no longer limited to that time of festival, but has been absorbed by and reified in the excesses of the community of Mystic. Recognizing Soren Kierkegaard’s aesthetic, ethical, and religious spheres of existence, Detweiler constructs descriptions of texts of pain, love and worship “that provoke religious reading” (45). Hence, this paper recognizes the positive implications of Detweiler’s practice in its pursuit to facilitate and expound the discussion of Christian literary and cultural criticisms.

Given these points, O’Connor sets up the South as a type of Christian community, one that has a knowledge of basic Christian doctrine, professes to believe in such doctrine, but exhibits little in the way of spiritual regeneration that demonstrates authentic belief. Whereas O’Connor sought to intentionally explore Christian themes and explicitly address the Christ-haunted South, Crews contorts the traditional religious rituals and focuses more on the idea of festival and its elements of excesses. In addition,

A Feast of Snakes appears to have Detweiler's trifold of susceptibility to religious readings: pain, love, and worship. Overall, a communal and ritualistic interpretation investigates the framework out of which the chaos of Mystic arises, and therefore, presents a more thorough understanding of the Southern region, the world, and ourselves as explored through the "Christ-haunted" communities presented in these works. In this way, this paper chases after the shadows and reengages in conversations with the invisibles for the purpose of determining the ghosts' fierce instruction.

In Chapter 2, I will further expound on the characteristics of the Christ-haunted South and will examine the overt Christ-haunting of the Misfit. In him, we discover the effects of a Southern community that is ill-prepared to handle his quest for spiritual meaning while obstinately circumscribing the fundamentals of his Christian foundation. By analyzing his character, we see his specific struggle of his nihilist rumination against his inability to accept responsibility for his sinful state, come to terms with his faith, and accept the grace of the Gospel message. Because O'Connor essentially creates the mold for the Christ-haunted region and its characters, and because the existing criticism of "A Good Man is Hard to Find" primarily coincides with the theological perspective I contend, this chapter serves as a springboard by which I will delve into *A Feast of Snakes*.

Subsequently, in what at first resembles a shit-storm of feces, rape, abuse, and savage brutality, *A Feast of Snakes* unveils the more introspective, but nonetheless intense personal struggle of Joe Lon Mackey. Hence, Chapter 3 more extensively scrutinizes the myths and rituals that are responsible for the chaos and excess that plague Mystic and are obstacles for Joe Lon. It examines the corruption of both individuals and

the community, which negatively affect Joe Lon's quest to determine what "ails" him. By doing so, this chapter reveals gaps left by the critical interpretations that primarily focus on the text's elements of naturalism and ignore the religious context of the work.

The final chapter discusses the similarities between the Misfit and Joe Lon's journeys as citizens of the Christ-haunted South and explores how the religious inconsistencies and shortcomings of this region hinder the individual discovery of the divine. By exploring these texts' Christian elements, this paper seeks to facilitate a better understanding of the culture in which the stories take place and offer instructive criticisms of Christian communities, especially those that have reduced Christianity to mere ideology or spectacle. Moreover, it expressly acknowledges that religion is an integral component of Southern culture and therefore integral to the criticism of its literature, and it implies the continued need for the breadth and depth of theological discussions in modern American literature as a whole.

Chapter II

THE PROTOTYPE IN “A GOOD MAN IS HARD TO FIND”

I will now turn the discussion to “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” for it is in this story that we see first-hand elements of the Christ-haunted South and how they impact the two main characters. The Misfit has a foundational knowledge of the Bible including the account of the Gospel. Based on his dialogue in the text, he appears to suffer from the inability to have religious matters of faith satisfactorily resolved. All the while, he relentlessly refuses to acknowledge his responsibility for his choices. Instead, he prefers to cast the blame outward, from Jesus’ resurrection to society’s inconsistencies of its governing conventions and institutions. In so doing, he refuses to conform to the standard of a “good man” and has previously determined that if Christ’s resurrection is a fallacy there is “no pleasure but meanness.” We are only briefly privy to the Misfit’s thoughts—literally, only about six pages of text, and in this small window of time, he engages in conversation with the grandmother. Nevertheless, the wealth of insight into the Misfit’s introspection against the backdrop of the Grandmother’s spiritual superficiality has been the subject of an abundance of criticism. By constructing the characteristics of the Christ-haunted South through the grandmother’s actions, we can better understand the role the region’s religious superficiality plays in the Misfit’s past actions, his current interactions with the grandmother and his state of unbelief.

Certainly, there is some legitimate concern if an author’s interpretation of her work becomes the primary focus. Generally, most literary critics protest that the author’s

commentary is distracting and limiting to the possible interpretations of the text. Others may disparage it further and say the author's commentary is completely inconsequential to the text and could even distort it altogether. For example, D. H. Lawrence notably said, "Never trust the teller, trust the tale. The proper function of a critic is to save the tale from the artist who created it." Nonetheless, in the case of O'Connor, who was very vocal about her faith and considered her writing the vehicle by which she proselytized to an audience "who thinks God is dead," it is rather difficult to completely sever the text from the author (MM 92).

In their collaboration "How the Church Became Invisible: A Christian Reading of American Literary Tradition," Stanley Hauerwas and Ralph Wood single out Flannery O'Connor as one of only two "distinctively Christian," modern American authors and believe her "distinctively Christian fiction [makes] the reality of the triune God unavoidable while doing so in nonpropagandistic, noncoercive terms, which is to say, in sacramental terms" (Lundin 159, 171). They allege that the theological authenticity of O'Connor's work stems from her refusal to mollicoddle her audience:

For O'Connor, the real opposites to the sacramental imagination are the sentimental and the pornographic. The former undermines faith as the latter destroys art. They are both shortcuts to emotional fulfillment, bypassing the hard moral and spiritual obstacles scattered along the road to truth. Tough-minded charity discerns the worth of human beings through the aperture of God's own costly sacrifice, while soft-core pity sees them through the lens of easy and all-sanctioning feelings. (Lundin 215)

By dealing with the issues through "sacramental rather than moral terms alone,"

O'Connor elevates the theological implications of the very impious social status quo of the South and legitimizes her place in the interpretive Christian community.

The South's social status quo and its sense of civility mentioned previously blur the lines of moral standards, religious doctrine, and spiritual depth. As its title suggests, there is a shortage of "good" men in this story, but the women are not much better, and it implies that this is equally true of society at large. As the Bible Belt, the South literally constitutes an expanse of land where many of the predominantly Protestant inhabitants regularly attend church, and practice the faith and its rituals. Other residents might merely adhere to a sense of religion based on Judeo-Christian values, which serves in a cultural capacity. The latter group forms their definitions of good and bad based on those cultural values rather than explicit biblical doctrine. When referring to the white population, both groups have been complacent with regards to social injustices towards the African American community.

O'Connor seemed to take special care to point out the hypocrisy of the white Southerners' sense of moral superiority and their blatant disregard for the inferior living conditions of the black community under the South's deplorable generational and institutional racism. In "A Good Man," this hypocrisy is best seen in the grandmother. She romanticizes about the days of plantations and slavery, flippantly uses the derogatory terms "nigger" and "pickaninny" when referring to blacks, and mindlessly considers the poverty of blacks quaint. In one scene, the grandmother points out "a Negro child standing in the door of a shack" (CS 119). When June Star observes that he is not wearing any pants, the grandmother replies, "Little niggers in the country don't have things like we do. If I could paint, I'd paint that picture" (CS 119). The passive father,

the nameless mother, and the spoiled children are all products of the Christ-haunted South, but it is the grandmother who exhibits its most repulsive effects. Her merry ignorance incites ire in the other characters and readers alike as she blissfully goes about life spewing clichés and white lies with a puffed-up pride, all the while wagging her finger in disapproval at others without the least bit of introspection.

If the grandmother thinks too little, it could be said the Misfit thinks too much. As his self-imposed moniker suggests, the Misfit is different from those around him—first, his family and later, society. From a young age, the Misfit does not readily accept what he is told; he must know why and how. While the Misfit asserts he was never a “bad boy,” his father sets him apart from his siblings by declaring his son as “a different breed of dog from [his] brothers and sisters” and as one of the “others [that] has to know why it is” (CS 128-9). The Misfit is born a thinker, and he develops into a man whose intellect estranges him from the faith he cannot logically reconcile in his mind. Jordan Cofer notes, “He grew up in a strict fundamentalist family and is very introspective about his nihilism” (54). This introspection seeks to judiciously justify his rejection of his Christian foundation. In her book *Flannery O’Connor: Voice of the Peacock*, Sister Kathleen Feeley proposes that O’Connor deems intellectuals as unable “to believe anything which [their] minds cannot encompass” and that quality directly correlates to her characters’ “self-sufficient pride,” and therefore, “man as ‘thinker’ is man alienated from the part of reality which is mystery” (54). This is the condition of the Misfit when he engages with the grandmother.

In the beginning of their conversation, the grandmother tries to manipulate the Misfit by insisting that she knows he is a good man from good people, so he would not

harm her or her family. She is unable to engage him on a deeper level because she is confined to the parameters of the shallow culture she represents. The Misfit maintains a chilling politeness, his Southern manners so to speak, during the entire murderous rampage. He says “yes’m” and “nome,” and he courteously asks each of the family members to kindly step “back in them woods” (CS 128). By doing so, the Misfit shows his ability, and in essence, the ability of anyone, to easily mimic the cultural standards without being in accordance with them. The grandmother, in turn, is deceived by the Misfit’s outward gestures, and mistakenly believes he functions the same way.

The Misfit soon reveals, however, that he is not operating under the same cultural rules. As her son, Bailey, walks off into the woods, the grandmother pleads with the Misfit: “‘I just know you’re a good man,’ she said desperately. ‘You’re not a bit common’” (CS 128). The Misfit concedes, however, that he “ain’t a good man,” but he comparatively declares, “[he] ain’t the worst in the world neither” (CS 128). His admission that he is not a good man shows he is aware that he does not measure up to society’s gauge of “good,” and it demonstrates his refusal to engage in pretenses. On the other hand, the Misfit’s immediate need to clarify that others are worse than him signals his own distortion of a Christ-centered approach which acknowledges that it is futile to excuse one’s sinful state based on the worse states of others; each must answer for his own sin: “For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (ESV, Romans 3.22-23). In this respect, T.W. Hendricks refers to the Misfit as “Everyman”—the claim that all men since the fall of Adam are “being punished for [his] disobedience” (134). Still, the Misfit’s failure to accept total responsibility for his predicament rather than blame others or elevate himself above others puts him “at odds

with the fundamental proposition of Christianity that all humans are born in a state of sin” (Hendricks 134). His refusal to confess, or repent, also puts him at odds with the fundamental call of the Christ-centered life: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (ESV, 1 John 9.1).

In her initial appeals to the Misfit’s moral decency, the grandmother inquires as to whether he ever prays. The Misfit gives a negative reply. After two shots from the woods indicate the murders of Bailey and John Wesley, he calmly dismisses the grandmother’s painful cries, ignores the spiritual nature of her question, and seeks to qualify his goodness based on societal norms, but his list of experiences grows progressively darker:

“I was a gospel singer for a while,” the Misfit said. “I been most everything. Been in the arm service both land and sea, at home and abroad, been twicet married, been an undertaker, been with the railroads, plowed Mother Earth, been in a tornado, seen a man burnt alive oncet,” and he looked up at the children’s mother and the little girl who were sitting close together, their faces white and their eyes glassy; “I even seen a woman flogged,” he said. (CS 129-30)

This chronicle of events serves as a map of the Misfit’s gradual descent to his present state where he is unfazed by the current heinous acts taking place under his orders: “In his view, physical contact is for torture, and being a religious singer is no more meritorious or memorable than seeing a woman flogged” (Fike 315). At some point, his desire to live within societal norms—being married and earning a living—subsides, and he begins to gravitate from a witness to violence to an active participant who projects meanness on others. His need to describe those horrific events, particularly the last one

while making eye contact with the mother and June Star, reveals the nefarious side of the Misfit. The calm, calculated manner in which he describes such a diabolical act suggests that not only did he witness such barbarity, but that he is complicit with it.

According to his personal account, we see a pattern that indicates his own acts of aggression escalated over time. “He began to cut corners and to trim edges, until he gradually came to commit and to justify evil deeds” (Wood 40). Eventually, he is caught, punished, and suffered consequences under man’s law. In the confinement of the penitentiary, the Misfit is like a wild animal pacing his cage: “Turn to the right, it was a wall . . . Turn to the left, it was a wall. Look up it was a ceiling, look down it was a floor” (CS 130). His thoughts are not of remorse for his actions; instead, he claims to be unaware of what he could have done to receive his punishment: “I set there and set there, trying to remember what it was I done and I ain’t recalled it to this day” (CS 130). Strangely, in spite of his inability to “remember what it was [he] done,” he does acknowledge that he was rightly incarcerated for his crimes because “they had the papers on [him]” (CS 130). Even though the Misfit will not confess his wrongdoing, the “papers” are literal and tangible documents; therefore, they are acceptable and credible evidence that he was deserving of penalty.

The Misfit’s inability to remember his crimes is questionable. Can he sincerely forget the egregious act of murdering someone? Are his crimes so numerous his memory is blurred? Is this just a continuing pattern of the Misfit’s refusal to acknowledge his responsibility? The newspaper article the grandmother is reading at the beginning of the story contains horrid details of his crimes: “Here this fellow that calls himself the Misfit is aloose from the Federal Pen and headed toward Florida and you read here what it says

he did to these people. Just you read it. I wouldn't take my children in any direction with a criminal like that loose in it" (CS 117). In other words, the Misfit is not a petty thief; he has been in a federal penitentiary, and his escape is notable enough to make the *Atlanta Journal*, the city's leading newspaper at the time.

As he laments that he cannot "make what all [he] done wrong fit what all [he] gone through in punishment," the Misfit minimizes his transgressions by forming his own philosophy of crime and punishment: "I found out the crime don't matter. You can do one thing or you can do another, kill a man or take a tire off his car, because sooner or later you're going to forget what you done and just be punished for it" (CS 130-1). This reasoning stems from the conflict of his acquisitive nature with his foundational knowledge of the Bible. Even as he attempts to overlook his specific crimes, the Misfit is keenly aware that he is not without fault. He dismisses the gravity of his offenses putting all sin on an equal plane—killing and taking a tire are both wrong and deserve punishment. In other words, the state of original sin makes all men guilty and "he realizes that since legalism and grace can never be reconciled, the law cannot work exactly" (Cofer 60). Hence, he endures intrinsic turmoil because of his guilt under God's law, and because he "has let his faith fall prey to the reasonings and literalism of the rational mind," he cannot fathom grace (Brinkmeyer 160).

Consequently, the Misfit conceives his own method of documentation to mimic that used by the legal system. Unwilling to blindly accept religious or civil judgement, the Misfit develops "his own rudimentary moral accounting system to try and counterbalance his actions with the consequences" (Cofer 60). He believes he can counter any evidence with his own moral code in order to dispute any future accusations

or penalties:

“I said long ago, you get you a signature and sign everything you do and keep a copy of it. Then you’ll know what you done and you can hold up the crime to the punishment and see do they match and in the end you’ll have something to prove you ain’t been treated right. I call myself the Misfit,” he said, “because I can’t make all I done wrong fit with all I gone through in punishment.” (CS 131)

Like a contumacious child shouting, “That’s not fair!” the Misfit steadily deflects any responsibility for his actions. Wood describes the Misfit’s state in this manner:

“Nietzschean will to power ends in solipsistic victimology” (43). In the meantime, his henchmen, Hiram and Bobby Lee, coldly murder the remaining family members while he nonchalantly continues his conversation with the grandmother.

The Misfit continues to rationalize his delinquency and bemoan his punishment, and his mental anguish intensifies. His tone in the conversation grows increasingly agitated. When the Misfit says he does not know why he was punished, the grandmother suggests that he may have stolen something. He is insulted, and his anger begins to surface: “The Misfit sneered slightly. ‘Nobody had nothing I wanted,’ he said” (CS 130). His rebuttal illustrates that his criminal history has nothing to do with material gain. Rather, it demonstrates his commitment to nihilism: “To steal a desirable object would be to acknowledge the reality of a good other than his own sovereign self-will. The Misfit relishes, instead, the deeds of annihilation: murder and arson and cruelty” (Wood 41). Ultimately, he has traded one philosophy for another; his inward rebelliousness against his fundamental Christian roots has transformed into an exaltation of nihilism.

At the outset, the grandmother’s insistence that the Misfit pray is a vain attempt to

get him to spare her life, not for him to address his spiritual depravity. Due to her own spiritual inadequacies, she mindlessly rattles off religious clichés in the futile hope they will provoke the Misfit's moribund conscience. By making the cultural assumption that he is a Bible-believing Christian, the grandmother superficially tries to appeal to that understanding. Clearly, the Misfit knows about the life of Jesus. He refers to the accounts of the miracles Jesus worked, such as raising people from the dead, and his unjustified crucifixion. When the grandmother suggests that "Jesus would help [him]," he acquiesces that Jesus could indeed provide him with solutions, but he declines: "I don't want no hep," he said, "I'm doing all right by myself" (CS 130). In his reply, the Misfit has simultaneously affirmed a knowledge of Christ and his rejection of the salvation He offers.

Gradually, the gravity of the situation forces the grandmother to address her own shallow belief. She throws her last bargaining chip on the table: "I'll give you all the money I got" (CS 132). But the Misfit cannot be bought, and he phlegmatically responds, "there never was a body that give the undertaker a tip" (CS 132). As the final gunshots reverberate from the woods, it is as if the painful reality has finally pierced through her veneer to her soul: "the grandmother raised her head like a parched old turkey hen crying for water and called, 'Bailey Boy, Bailey Boy!' as if her heart would break" (CS 132). She has run the gambit on appeals that she believes would have an impact on the Misfit: his moral decency, his good blood, social constraints, material gain and a belief in Jesus. He will have none of it.

Oblivious to the old woman's distress, the Misfit proceeds to lament that Christ's resurrection put him in the precarious position. The Misfit is acutely aware that if in fact

the biblical account is true, “then it’s nothing for [him] to do but throw away everything and follow [Jesus]” (CS 132). Herein, lies the epitome of the Christ-centered life and the very real calling of every self-professing Christian. There is no middle ground, and this stands in accordance with Christ’s own words: “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters” (ESV, Mat 12.30). The Misfit makes his choice; he renounces the gospel. As he reflects on his decision, his indignation smolders:

“and if He didn’t [raise the dead], then it’s nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can—by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness,” he said and his voice had become almost a snarl. (CS 132)

His need for firsthand knowledge, physical evidence, and proof solidify the Misfit’s inability to exercise faith. Without faith, he is ensnared in a maddening, hopeless state of nihilism: “He sees, as O’Connor often observed, that ours is not a culture of moral progress and evolutionary development but the culture of death. The final alternatives, The Misfit discerns, are not religion and science, but the gospel and nihilism” (Wood 42).

As the Misfit’s frustration at his inability to logically compartmentalize the mystery of the Christian paradigm intensifies, the grandmother’s feeble faith crumbles. She expresses doubt that Jesus raised the dead although she did “not [know] what she was saying” (CS 132). The Bible defines Christ-centered faith as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (ESV, Heb. 11.1). In her spiritual deficiency, the grandmother lacks assurance and conviction, so she is unable to exercise faith. The lack of conviction in things unseen also eludes the Misfit, and his anger festers: “I wisht I had of been there, he said, hitting the ground with his fist” (CS 132).

The nihilist cannot resolve Christ's claim of resurrection and uses that as an excuse for his inward turmoil (Cofer 55). Soon, the anger gives way to hopelessness and despair. His voice elevates and "seemed about to crack . . . [and his] face twisted . . . as if he were going to cry" (CS 132). The Misfit reveals his vulnerability. Moved by this, the grandmother is face to face with the man who has ordered the murder of her family and will soon murder her. She sees beyond the exterior façade of his brutality, and envisions a helpless human being, much like herself. Her soft utterance that he is "one of her babies," one of her own children connects them to their shared state of hopelessness: "[S]he tells the truth; she is not a good woman; he is not a good man; they both are in terrible trouble, and they both need radical help" (Wood 39). The Christian narrative declares that radical help is found in the resurrection of Christ: "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (ESV, Acts 4.12).

Since the publication of the story, critics have disputed the meaning of what takes place next: "She reached out and touched him on the shoulder. The Misfit sprang back as if a snake had bitten him and shot her three times through the chest" (CS 132). Most critics have taken their interpretation cue from O'Connor: "I prefer to think that, however unlikely this may seem, the old lady's gesture, like the mustard-seed, will grow to be a great crow-filled tree in the Misfit's heart . . ." (MM 113). She also explicitly suggested that readers "be on the lookout for such things as the action of grace in the Grandmother's soul" (MM 113). Although the Christian elements of her work are strong enough to stand alone, if we heed O'Connor's instruction to *look*, we see the details, like breadcrumbs, leading us to the "moment in every great story in which the presence of

grace can be felt as it waits to be accepted or rejected, even though the reader may not recognize this moment” (MM 118). The Misfit has ordered the murders of the grandmother’s family, and she is most aware that her own time is running out. Asals concedes that the story “captures a very old truth, that in the midst of life we are in death” (142).

In this situation, the grandmother’s head cleared for an instant,” and in that instant, clarity, sincerity, and understanding replace the old woman’s unthinking, mindless ignorance. Like Christ’s crucifixion, the grandmother’s words offer freedom from the Misfit’s self-imposed exile and bestow upon him a new identity that reconnects him to both humanity and the mystery of the divine: “Through her selfless actions, her embrace, and forgiveness, she becomes a conduit of God’s grace” (Cofer 61). Unfortunately, the Misfit cannot withstand the grandmother’s physical manifestation of grace. Asals sees this as a reflection of the binaries by which the Misfit views life: “The choice is finally a stark either/or, which to the Misfit takes the form of Jesus or meanness” (151). As he has done no doubt countless times before, and in this moment again, he chooses meanness.

The Misfit’s emotional, impulsive reaction to the grandmother’s touch is a departure from his calm, calculated demeanor, and it is his only direct act of violence against the family. As a result, the Misfit’s most recent hostile action separates him further from both society and the faith he cannot attain. In the moments following, the Misfit gives the impression he has indeed comprehended the full extent of what has just taken place. His declaration that the grandmother “would have been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life” denotes he witnessed the

grace that changed her. By killing the grandmother, however, all semblance of joy in this despicable deed or any deeds to follow are gone. When Bobby Lee spouts, “Some fun!” the Misfit silences him and somberly proclaims, “It’s no real pleasure in life” (CS 133).

While most critics adhere to the theological examination of O’Connor’s work, Stephen Bandy has staunchly refused to kowtow to her Christian perspective. He believes “the Grandmother’s role as a grace-bringer is by now a received idea, largely because the author said it is so” (109). He protests that grace is too much of a “complex machinery” to implement in the “alien world of the Grandmother and the Misfit” (110). He argues that the grandmother is a grand manipulator and “having exhausted all other appeals to the Misfit, resorts to her only remaining (though certainly imperfect) weapon: motherhood” (110). Bandy bases this argument on the fact that O’Connor’s projections are of the *possible* effects of the grandmother’s perceived grace, noting that none of it actually takes place in the text. More importantly, he contends that “this is not the way grace works;” citing the definition of grace in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Bandy argues, “If grace was extended to the Misfit, he refused it and that is the end” (111). He goes on to suggest that the Misfit and the grandmother are “mirror images” describing the Misfit as merely “a more completely evolved form of the Grandmother” (116).

Surely, Bandy makes some valid points against the interpretation of the grandmother’s epiphany, but he fails to acknowledge a key piece of textual evidence. Even if he chooses to ignore O’Connor’s views and disparage the grandmother’s intentions, he cannot simply dismiss the Misfit’s own declaration that she was a good woman in the moment before her death. Bandy, himself, asserts, “The Misfit trusts nothing that he has not himself witnessed, touched, weighed, and measured” (115).

Therefore, the grandmother's transformation must have been palpable. The Misfit had to witness a very real change in the grandmother in order to make that assessment.

For the purpose of this paper, the grandmother's experience with grace is only important in the way it affects the Misfit. Her transfiguration takes place in front of him. She becomes as Christ, the original conduit of God's grace. Her words imply forgiveness and a love "as close as human beings can come to the love God has for them" (Michaels 91). The tangible proof he longed for was gifted to him in her words that he hears and her touch that he feels, but his reaction was to swiftly and instinctually eradicate it. He gets his wish. He was there. He knows. Yet, he is still the way he is. O'Connor referred to the Misfit as a "spoiled prophet," who was not proselytizing his beliefs as much as he, rather painfully, was declaring his *unbelief* while exposing the shallow belief of the grandmother (Hendricks 128). O'Connor also suggests, there remains a possibility that he may one day accept the spiritual grace that has the power to generate the faith that he simply cannot muster of his own accord. O'Connor's hope for him is the same hope she had for the Christ-haunted South.

While I believe the Misfit's conversation with the grandmother highlights his depth and her lack of it, it is the work of the fierce and instructive ghosts of the Christ-haunted South that do the true proselytizing. His experience with the mystery of what transpired has indeed penetrated him because he no longer adheres to the philosophy of no pleasure but meanness. There is a crack in his nihilist lens. True, the grandmother is painfully annoying and her lack of spiritual depth is dangerous, but the real threat to a Christ-haunted South is nihilism: "For O'Connor, the fetid air of nihilism is morally, no less than religiously, asphyxiating: it is not an intellectual game of shifting about counters

on a philosophical board; rather, it is a life-posture dedicated to the destruction of life” (Woods 179). In a strange way, Christ-centered Christianity and Nihilism have more in common than Christ-centered and Christ-haunted Christianity. O’Connor points this out by making the Misfit more doctrinally astute than the grandmother. He wrestles with the unknowns; he understands the very clear binary call of Christianity that essentially says: “throw everything away and follow [Jesus]” (CS 132). Until her interaction with the Misfit, the grandmother has never contemplated such things.

The Misfit’s journey then becomes the prototype of the Southern man who suffers under the superficiality of the Christ-haunted South. The outwardly religious community that should be able to engage and guide him fails to do so because of its own inward decay. Instead, the Misfit succumbs to the draw of the secular forces in his desperate attempt to find the answers he seeks, but his dialogue with the grandmother suggests he remains unfulfilled. Thus, we can take the Misfit’s endeavor and apply it to Crew’s Joe Lon Mackey. Joe Lon is also seeking answers. He, too, has succumbed to secular forces that promise gratification, but they have not delivered. He, too, futilely looks to his Christ-haunted community for solutions.

Chapter III

THE MISFIT OF MYSTIC

For the most part, Joe Lon Mackey fits right in with the surrounding mania of his hometown of Mystic, Georgia. His past glory as an all-state running back elevated his status there, and he still enjoys an element of celebrity. Sadly, however, his former heroics on the football field cannot console his troubled spirit, and he struggles to find contentment in his present circumstances. Ironically, this wife-beating, liquor-drinking, fight-seeking character is often introspective, and his internal thoughts suggest he wants better for himself. Unfortunately, with so many obstacles hindering him, Joe Lon's fate seems determined, and it appears there could be no other resolution than his shootout and demise at the end of the novel.

In *A Feast of Snakes*, Crews creates his own version of the Christ-haunted South where the characters do not engage in explicit theological discussions, and the citizens of Mystic seem to have abandoned Christianity altogether. Using Robert Detweiler's definition of religion, and as the town's name suggests, the community is still deemed religious as it seeks to gain control over and have knowledge beyond that of the natural world through its myths and symbolic ritual practices (Detweiler 38). Mystic's myths convey the message that strength through violence is the way to obtain power and control, and their rituals are centered on ways in which those who demonstrate such abilities can be worshipped. Appropriately, the mascot of their myths is the snake and the rituals of football and the roundup provide a means by which the community, in cult-

like worship of the snake, can celebrate violence. Through the festival-ritual “carnavalesque dimensions,” the snake roundup encourages bodily indulgences such as drinking and sex; rules are broken, and authority ridiculed (Detweiler 40). As a festival-ritual, the roundup should serve as a break from the norm, but in Mystic, this behavior has extended beyond the time set for the roundup. As a result, their religious practices regrettably do not achieve their intended purpose of order; instead, they create the chaos demonstrated in the pre roundup bonfire (Detweiler 38). Nonetheless, Joe Lon seeks meaning for his life within the framework of the community and its religion. However, the community fails him because it has assigned Joe Lon to his place in it, his meaning as former high school football star and snake roundup festival organizer.

In order to do analyze the community as a whole and his role in it, we first look to the symbol of the snake and the many ways it operates in the community. Most obviously, as David Jeffrey points out, snakes are “emblems of religious evil” (47). Certainly, the Christian significance cannot go unnoticed as snakes conjure images of the biblical account of the Garden of Eden and the fall of man. The rampant corruption and immorality of Mystic surely signify a fallen world. Therefore, the community’s worship of the serpent suggests their compliance with the evil it represents. One example of this is demonstrated by the town’s knowledge of and refusal to intervene in Sheriff Buddy Matlow’s habit of taking young girls, putting them in jail, and raping them. The community’s reverence for Buddy’s status as a former football “Boss Snake” and a wounded war veteran supersedes any notion of moral judgment of his actions.

Along those same lines, the community’s blind adoration of Joe Lon’s extremely successful record as “Boss Snake” in the exalted ritual of football overlooks his

misdeeds. It failed to hold him accountable even though “it was commonly known that [Joe Lon] had done several pretty bad things” including murder a man by drowning him in a creek as “nearly the entire first string watched from high up on a bank where they were sipping beer” (Crews 6). In this instance, the football team is obviously impervious to violence, as they witness the heinous act of murder while casually drinking beer. As with Buddy, the community at large shows its complacency with such acts by knowing about them but refusing to punish Joe Lon or even reprimand him. Instead, he maintains a reputation as “being the most courteous boy in all of Lebeau County” (Crews 6).

Along with its representation of evil, Robert Covel notes that Crews establishes the “two extremes of the serpent image: one the raw Freudian sensuality of the phallic image and the other the brutal violence of the reptile” (80). Frequently, these extremes are enmeshed together rather than working independently from one another. From the very first pages, the overt sexuality of the snake symbolism is present. The snake applique on the front of Hard Candy’s sweater is described as if it were alive: “She felt the snake between her breasts, felt him there, and loved him there, coiled, the deep tumescent S held rigid, ready to strike” (Crews 1). The terms tumescent and rigid conjure images of an erect penis, and her described affection for such demonstrates her desire for the power it represents. In a similar illustration, Joe Lon recalls a sexual escapade with Bernice in an abandoned snake pit: “She was touching him now, with both hands, tentatively, squeezing and pressing . . . moving over his body like the twin heads of blind snakes” (Crews 32). Bernice sexually aroused by her imagined “cold bath of snakes,” envisions them permeating her body, writhing “in her blood [and] crawling through [her] heart” as she eventually works her way to “the Boss Snake of all the

snakes,” Joe Lon’s penis (Crews 31-2). For Berenice, sex is the primary way she is able to siphon power and control in this community saturated in masculinity. In the case of Joe Lon, sex is merely one more way in which he can violently obtain power and control. This perpetual interaction with snakes both real and symbolic appears to keep the citizens of Mystic continuously in heat.

Drawing on the ancient Greeks’ connection to the serpent, Covell also suggests that Crews is highlighting “the conflict between rural (pagan) and urban (modern) value systems” (81). Frank Shelton believes locals and visitors alike vainly seek out ritual in order “to attain some kind of control over life, but such control is always tenuous, given facts of existence and human nature” (113). However, it is more likely urban dwellers, like Duffy and Susan Gender, flock to Mystic to partake in the “carnavalesque dimensions” of the snake roundup. They descend on the town and join alongside the members of the community in their worship and participation in excess. Initially, the roundup was “a local thing, a few townspeople, a few farmers,” but over the past decade, it has grown out of control, and the quaint local ritual shifted to a tourist spectacle (Crews 17). The present chaos of the snake roundup demonstrates how quickly the mob overruns the community which descends into pandemonium, but it also shows the town’s consent to such behavior. Any illusions of ritualistic control are replaced with overflowing Johnny-on-the-spots, flipped RVs, and free-for-all brawls. From the serpent hierarchy of the football team to the trancelike movement of the crowd at the pre roundup bonfire, the town of Mystic and the throng of visitors exude occult behavior in their devotion to and worship of the snake and all it represents.

As Boss Snake and record-setting football star, the community worshipped Joe Lon, and consequently, contributed to his illiteracy. His inability to read brought an abrupt halt to his football career. The text tells us he “could have been going to the University of Georgia in Athens [to play football] or anywhere else in the country he wanted to” (Crews 5). His teachers “who had been privileged to have him in their classrooms thought he probably couldn’t [read],” but instead of holding him back and insisting that he learn, they indulged him because “they liked him anyway, even loved him” (Crews 5-6). As a result, his inability to read brought an abrupt halt to his football career. Clearly, Joe Lon was not a savant, but he had the wherewithal to learn. Citing textual evidence, Michael Spikes argues that Joe Lon commits to memory numerous sophisticated plays and considers himself more intelligent than his peers; therefore, he shrewdly discerns “Mackey is ‘dumb’ only in those areas he *chooses* to be dumb” (Crews 49; Spikes, “Rereading” 88). Still, the community’s overall glorification of football and specifically his talent in the sport permitted Joe Lon to believe that he did not *need* to read, and inadvertently, their indulgent adoration curtailed his football career and consequently, relegated him to a future stuck in Mystic.

Once feted in the culture of football as “Boss Snake,” two years after high school graduation Joe Lon finds himself on the outskirts of his community’s rituals. This new position spurs his introspection, which has led to an internal crisis. He attempts to satisfy his unrest by the means which his community has promoted. He tries to assure himself “about ten times a day” that his past accolades on the football field are substantial enough to satisfy his present despair: “That’s all right. By God, I had mine” (Crews 7). However, the salve of former glory no longer soothes the festering sore of his present

inward turmoil. Likewise, notions of rekindled love or memories of teenage acrobatic sex fail to arouse his interest, and as he reads a note from his former lover, Berenice, indicating she would be returning soon, it brings him “no pleasure” (Crews 7). Similarly, he finds no relief in his present circumstances. At home, Joe Lon is overcome with “suffocating anger” (Crews 8). Elfie, his meek and long-suffering wife, tries to appease him with an amiable attitude and mediocre cooking, but Joe Lon’s cruel unpredictability keeps her anxious. Her nervousness both convicts and incites him: “It made him sick with shame and at the same time he wanted to kill her” (Crews 11). Working at his father’s liquor store, Joe Lon muses that his legs once ran “with four-five speed for forty yards” but now are “carrying shine for a carload of niggers,” and he steadily drinks from the inventory in an attempt to pacify his constant agitation (Crews 18). Dissatisfaction in the conquests of the past and the futility of the present churns in Joe Lon’s head until it releases through his irrepressible wild howls linking him both to his father’s dogs and Pentecostal minister Victor.

As the patriarch, Big Joe is responsible for the ritual of dogfighting, and he rules over his dogs and his family with a ruthless hand. He obtains notoriety by having the “best pit bulldogs in all of Georgia” (Crews 40). The dogs, not his children, are “the pride of his life,” and his deep love for them is perversely expressed “with a savage unrelenting cruelty that even other pit bull owners could not bear to witness or emulate” (Crews 40). Big Joe’s sadistic training of his dogs undoubtedly mirrors his treatment of his family. As Beeder and Lottie Mae listen to Tuffy on the treadmill in the next room, they appear to lament the power of Big Joe over them all: “They stood for a long time watching the place beyond the wall where the thing was thumping. Finally Lottie Mae

said ‘*Before he’s through, he gone tie everyone on it*’” (Crews 133). In this scene, we see Big Joe as the cruel dog trainer, but also in the way David Jeffrey speculates the girls see him: “like a kind of god [who] will eventually tie everyone onto his machine . . . to find out how much punishment they can take” (48). Similarly, Tim Edwards claims that Big Joe plays an intricate part in the inner workings of the plot: “Big Joe, though something of a background character in the narrative, serves as a kind of metaphorical figure embodying the determining forces in the text” (49). Certainly, Big Joe’s oppressive force has dire consequences for his family, but Joe Lon’s sympathy for Tuffy and his sister, Beeder, and his remorse over his treatment of Elfie indicate that he may be different from his father.

In the position of deacon in *The Church of Jesus Christ With Signs Following*, Big Joe should be an example of a godly man who seeks to do what is right and just. Instead we find the characteristics of a Christ-haunted church. First of all, because Big Joe is “not a good man by anybody’s reckoning” (Crews 40), we can infer that his church does not give credence to biblical instruction for choosing deacons found in 1 Timothy: “Therefore [a deacon] must be above reproach . . . not a drunkard, not violent but gentle . . . well thought of by outsiders . . . not double-tongued . . . managing their children and their own households well . . .” (ESV, 1 Tim 3.1-12). Secondly, Big Joe is a hypocrite in the simplest of ways, and he fails to practice what he preaches. For instance, during one of the father and son’s conversations, Big Joe uses the term “goddam,” but moments later, he scolds Joe Lon when he says it: “You started to church, you’d stop so much of that heavy cussing. And particular you’d stop using that word to cuss with. It ain’t a fittin word for a man to use” (Crews 45). This disconnect between his father’s church

membership and moral behavior is not lost on Joe Lon who does not go to church despite his father “forever trying to get [him] to start going” (Crews 46). Joe Lon looks at his father as a representation of Christianity and wants no part of the farce of the Christ-haunted South.

At first, Victor, the snake-handling preacher from out of town, suggests an alternative to Big Joe’s hypocrisy. He serves in the capacity of prophet, and physically, he certainly conjures westernized images of Moses or similar Old Testament prophets: “His hair was white and full and twisted in tight coils all over his head and down his neck” (Crews 76). Unlike Big Joe, Victor’s actions and words appear to align in accordance to what he professes and he seems to have a legitimate devotion to God no matter the cost. Big Joe explains, “He’s been bit [by snakes] everywhere. It ain’t no more’n a kiss from his ma. He follers where God leads him” (Crews 101). Victor’s willingness to do as God commands gives him an appearance of control and power. As a result, he elicits a physical response from Joe Lon indicating his fear and respect: “Victor never talked of anything but God and snakes and his voice and the look in his eyes always made Joe Lon’s heart jump” (Crews 101). Ruth Brittin explains Joe Lon’s noticeable reaction: “Joe Lon is affected by Victor, knowing he himself is wrong in all he does,” and in this respect, “Victor acts as Joe Lon’s conscience” (97). As the impetus for Joe Lon’s conscience, Victor’s character stands in apparent opposition to the corruption of Big Joe, to the pagan idolatry of the crowd, and the general mayhem of the festival.

Consequently, Joe Lon reveres Victor from afar. He reprimands Willard for rudely harassing the preacher, but Willard fails to comprehend the importance of Victor’s rhetoric: “It’s not enough shit in the world, we got to have this too” (Crews 76).

However, when Joe Lon observes that “[Victor is] speckled as a guinea hen from rattlesnake bites,” he grasps the power associated with Victor’s faith and tries to explain the significance: “He . . . he . . . Willard, he *believes* all that stuff about the snake and God” (Crews 76). As a product of the Christ-haunted South and the outright paganism of Mystic, Joe Lon does not have a solid Christian foundation. He has enough “haunting” to believe God is omnipotent. He understands that God delivers judgment, and he is willing to accept his fate, but he does not see a clear pattern for it. Instead, he believes God’s wrath is random: “Believing as he did, though, in the total mystery, power, and majesty of God, Joe Lon assumed he had done *something*, and that he would never find out what it was” (Crews 57). As a result, Joe Lon’s trifling belief causes him to question his purpose in life:

What did he, Joe Lon, do? What did he have? He had once had football to fill up his mind and his body and his days and so he had never thought about it. Then one day football was gone and it took everything with it. He kept thinking that something else would surely take its place but nothing ever did. He stumbled from one thing to the next thing. From wife to babies to making a place for crazy campers bent on catching snakes. But nothing gave back. (Crews 102)

Unfortunately, Victor does not step in to engage Joe Lon and attempt to help him answer his questions. Without any direct guidance, Joe Lon cannot navigate the tides of the hopelessness and guilt he experiences.

When Michael Spikes suggests that Victor “hold[s] the key to understanding what *A Feast of Snakes*, on its deepest level, is truly about,” he is on the right track (“Victor” 411-2). Joe Lon observes a difference in Victor’s religion. He possesses a calmness and

control without displays of violence. He has the respect of Big Joe. He appears to read the Bible and abide by its moral code. Most importantly, his faith prompts him to the action of taking up serpents, and in his belief and obedience, they do not harm him. The biblical foundation for snake handling is found in the Book of Mark, and it is part The Great Commission, Jesus' command to his disciples: "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation" (ESV, Mark 16.15). With this instruction in mind, Victor fails in his proclamation of the gospel. He, perhaps vainly, seeks dramatic attention with his fragmented efforts to proselytize at the center of Mystic's ritual gatherings: the dog fight and the rattlesnake roundup. Whereas he speaks mostly of Satan and sin, the gospel message is that of Christ's sacrifice and atonement for sin, giving freedom from the bondage of it. It is this message of hope for a fallen world that Joe Lon fails to hear.

Hence, Joe Lon vacillates between the violent, hard drinking ways his community extols and the vulnerability and shame he feels for being like his father. Nowhere is this more evident than in his treatment of his wife, Elfie. She emotionally, physically, and sexually suffers under Joe Lon's sadistic and cruel abuse. Elfie's fearful quivering at Joe Lon's seething evokes in him simultaneous feelings of guilt and rage: "He wasn't looking at her but he knew she was still watching him, knew her plate was still empty, knew her mouth was trembling and trying to smile. It made him sick with shame and at the same time want to kill her" (Crews 10-11). After one violent outburst, Joe Lon reflects on his treatment of her: "But it didn't mean he ought to treat her like a dog. Christ he treated her just like a goddamn dog. He just couldn't help it. He didn't know why she stayed

with him” (Crews 12). The only example that he has to fall back on is the way his father “loves” his dogs.

Joe Lon keeps returning to the rituals of the past in the hopes of rekindling a sense of who he was when he was in control. When his Berenice, his high school girlfriend returns to town, he accepts a challenge from Willard to “put the wood” to her. The startling sexual encounter demonstrates why Allen Shepherd says, “the intensity of [Crews’] writing is unsettling” (61). During their interaction, there is talk of love, but the emotion is conspicuously absent. Animalistic in both approach and position, Joe Lon has Berenice assume her “four-point stance” and “he struck her from behind like she’d been a tackling dummy” (Crews 115). As Berenice babbles incessantly about who she loves and why baton twirling is significant, Joe Lon’s mind wanders to the source of his heavy heartedness, and he begins to recollect the details of his mother’s affair and suicide.

We learn through Joe Lon’s painful reflection that his mother had an affair with a ‘feminine-looking’ shoe salesman and left the family “for reasons of love” (Crews 119). Big Joe brought her back home against her will and that afternoon Beeder arrived home from school to find her mother had suffocated herself with Big Joe’s only tie and left a note that read, “bring me back now you son of a bitch” (Crews 120). As a result, Beeder descends into madness, never leaving her room, watching hours of television at high volume, and living in her own filth and excrement. David Buehrer points out the difference between Beeder’s immediate break from reality at the instant she discovers her mother’s body and Joe Lon’s ability to continue his day to day activities: “But [Beeder’s] transformation to psychosis happened immediately after she discovered her dead mother . . . For Joe Lon, that awful suicide has had years to fester . . .” (38). Thus he has had time

to determine that Mystic's rituals offer no relief to his despair: "Rage would not cure it. Indulgence made it worse, inflamed it, made it grow like a cancer" (Crews 117-118).

In order to prevent Berenice from going on about love, he insists she put his penis in her mouth. It is not enough, and even though he knows indulgence makes the "scabrous spot of rot" worse, he seeks a more perverse pleasure by having anal sex (Crews 117). Berenice willingly obliges, but will not stop her steady chatter of love, so he must counter her frivolous talk with his own empty declaration and announces that "goddam true love is taking it out of you ass and sticking it in you mouth" (Crews 121). In one quick motion, he turns her over and literally has Berenice eat her own shit. And she does so willingly and eagerly: "she—flushed and swooning—went down in a great spasm of joy, sucking like a baby before she ever got there" (Crews 121). As Shelton astutely observes, "Love has been reduced to competitive sex and [the women] are just as desirous of brutality as the men. The world [of Mystic] offers no redeeming love or tenderness" (111-2). After the tryst, Joe Lon watches Elfie from across the room and observes her humiliation "and he could have killed her, or killed them for making him want to kill her" (Crews 137). Elfie's weakness provokes his anger, but he recognizes his own powerlessness against the group and rather than project that anger inward, he wants to reclaim control and kill them for exposing his weakness.

Once the group arrives at the beauty pageant and bonfire, the festival has already descended into total bedlam, exemplifying carnivalesque dimensions of excess. Joe Lon observes the horde of people in front of the band on stage: "As far as Joe Lon could see, heads—close together and seemingly solid as the ground—bobbed and pulsed in an undulating wave to the rhythm of the music" (Crews 140). In addition to that, another

group circled around the paper mache snake they were to set on fire after the pageant. Remarking that he had never seen the crowd “so rank,” Joe Lon protectively sends Elfie home. Fights begin to break out, and after the pageant is underway, Joe Lon leaves despite seeing that “his old coach and Willard and Duffy were in danger of being hurt bad” (Crews 148). He makes his way through the parking lot and heads towards the liquor store, and the further he is separated from the crowd, the better he feels: “It felt good to be away from all those people, strangers and friends both. It felt good for the noise to diminish a little with each step that took him deeper in the woods” (Crews 148). Joe Lon here asserts his independence from the pressure of the crowd and from their ritual, and as a result, he feels good for the first time since the beginning of the story.

Emboldened by this feeling, Joe Lon calls and confronts his father. First, he sarcastically asks how Beeder is doing and wryly responds to his father’s reply, “Which is it? She fine? Or she like she always is?” (Crews 150). Yelling and crying, Joe Lon suggests they get the women of the family and his babies in a room and “beat the shit out of them” (Crews 151). He rhetorically questions his father: “We like that, don’t we? Me and you? Hem’m up in a room and beat’m good?” (Crews 151). Joe Lon’s insinuation that Big Joe beat his wife and family contrasts Big Joe’s claim that he did not tolerate abusing women. If true, it further indicates his father’s hypocrisy. By claiming a kinship with his father through their tendency to abuse their families, he blames his father for the ruination of their family and for the awful trait of abuse that Big Joe has passed on to him. In a sense, Joe Lon is holding his father accountable and asserting his independence from him. In so doing, Joe Lon reclaims his individuality in the face of the head of his family and the community’s complicit presence and pressure.

It is important to note that only three characters function, no matter how poorly, outside of the corruption of the community: Elfie, Beeder, and Lottie Mae. As Joe Lon's wife, Elfie suffers tremendously for being enmeshed in the community of violence. Even as a victim of his abuse, she manages to go about her daily tasks, including taking care of her two young children with an air of resilience. Upon seeing the bedlam at the bonfire, Elfie's initial reaction exemplifies her separation from the mob and her preference to be a mother and take care of her children: "I'd a known it was gone be like this," said Elfie, "I'd stayed with the youngans, what I'd done" (Crews 139). Though she is quick to forgive, twice she confronts Joe Lon about his behavior, which holds him accountable even if insignificantly. Certainly, it is a painful existence, but with every "Joe Lon, honey," she asserts her position in the community without having succumbed to its violent ways, or being completely defeated as a victim of it.

On the other hand, Beeder has chosen madness to escape from the community. She has confined herself to her brother's bedroom, and when Joe Lon suggests she will not be allowed to remain in the room forever, she responds, "I'm not hurting nobody" (Crews 48). In this statement, her motivation is evident. She resists being part of the community's worship of violence, and as a victim of it, has opted out through her TV-addled but lucid madness. Beeder goes on to say, "But you cain't ask for death. Anything else, maybe. But not death" (Crews 47). Beeder's feelings stem from the trauma of having witnessed her mother's suicide and perhaps from a remnant of biblical understanding that suicide is a mortal sin. During that same conversation, Beeder cryptically declares, "I would kill it if I could" (Crews 51). In her room and in her

madness, she has achieved the same end as her mother: “Sometimes she thought it might be better than her mother’s. But most times she did not” (Crews 72).

After essentially being kidnapped and then raped by Buddy, Lottie Mae suffers a break from reality and begins seeing hallucinations of snakes. She dreams of them. They become part of her body. She sees them in other people. When she tells Beeder of her predicament, Beeder tells her to arm herself and encourages Lottie Mae to kill “it” even though she has confessed she could not do the same (Crews 71). Lottie Mae professes she cannot kill it either, but she adheres to Beeder’s advice and carries a razor with her. Shortly thereafter, Buddy picks her up and takes her to the woods. When he exposes himself wearing a snake-like condom, Lottie Mae seizes the opportunity to use her blade and cuts off his penis and “kills” the snake. In this act, Lottie Mae usurps power from the community in the novel’s first example of retaliation against the abusive culture, thereby achieving justice for herself.

The news of Matlow’s death and the manner in which he died spreads quickly. There is little sympathy for him. Duffy responds, “A guy that gets his dick cut off’s got bad karma” (Crews 152). This perhaps echoes the Bible verses that haunts with a stern warning: “Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption” (ESV, Gal 6.7-8). Willard counters with his usual “devil may care” demeanor, “He is also shit out of luck” (Crews 152). Only Joe Lon responds with concern: “Nobody deserves to have their dick cut off” (Crews 155). Later in the evening when Joe Lon asks Willard if they have found out who killed Buddy, he responds, “Weren’t but several hundred had a reason to cut his dick off” (Crews 160). This further demonstrates the

long history of the community's complacency with Buddy taking and raping young girls like Lottie Mae and the sheer magnitude of the abuse. As part of the football-hero worship of Mystic, men like Buddy and Joe Lon could use their power to do as they please. They projected violence on others; they were the ones who killed. Consequently, Buddy's death and unfinished warning to Joe Lon reveal a potential outcome for Joe Lon that he had not considered. Seeing that his own demise may be imminent, perhaps at the hands of someone else, with more clarity, Joe Lon realizes he is not invincible, and he may eventually have to answer for his misdeeds.

As he is unable to articulate his despondency, Joe Lon's canine groaning grows in intensity and frequency. The characters' appearances, actions, and competitions frequently intertwine with the animal imagery. This is particularly so with Joe Lon and his father's latest champion fighting dog, Tuffy. Joe Lon and Tuffy are tied figuratively and literally to the abusive lives they were born into, and they seem unable to break free from the chains of their situations. Their laborious and desperate lives under the cruel auspices of Big Joe highlight the feeling of hopelessness. Tim Edwards charges that the "novel does not really deconstruct the traditional binary opposition of man/beast; rather it shows us, instead, that ultimately there is no difference between the human and the brute, between man and beast (46). To be sure, this is evident the night of the community's other ritual gathering, the dogfight, but by the end of the novel, Joe Lon has made a calculated, conscious decision which separates him from the instinctual behavior of animals.

First, Joe Lon must descend to the fight pit. There, he helps to warm up Tuffy for his big fight against Devil. Biblically, the term "pit" can refer to the grave or a holding

place for the dead, and in this type of allegory, the story plays out. Joe Lon talks to Tuffy “in a soft, sympathetic whisper” as they enter the pit together (Crews 154). The battle, at first, is Joe Lon’s, and in the arena, he is forced to confront and own up to his most recent indiscretion with Berenice. Unable to run away, Joe Lon is forced to listen to her embarrassment and shame of believing that he does not love her with a “goddamn true love” as he does Berenice. He must listen to her heartbreaking confession of the disgrace she feels knowing the details of what transpired in her and Joe Lon’s bed: “I cain’t look at the babies any more. I tried this morning after she showed me and I cain’t look at the babies any more. I’m too shamed. You shamed me so I cain’t look at my own babies” (Crews 156). Essentially, Elfie is carrying what should be Joe Lon’s burden of shame for having been the one to commit the act, and it has taken away her joy of being a mother.

In contrast, Berenice approaches Joe Lon with confidence. Joe Lon immediately responds to her by foretelling his actions: “I may have to kill you” (Crews 156). With little regard for anyone but herself, she makes “a clean breast of it” (Crews 156) by confessing their indiscretion to everyone. After reporting that Shep “understood and he’d always love [her],” she turns, and as she did before, she leaves Joe Lon to pick up the pieces. As a part of the dominating forces in the community, she will bear no consequences. Whatever their relationship once was, it will never be again, and Joe Lon cannot pretend otherwise.

By the time Shep enters the pit, and Joe Lon’s bestial instincts take over. He feels “a sudden blood lust” and is “afraid he might fall upon Shep and tear his throat out” (Crews 157). Shep timidly assures Joe Lon that he understands the incident with Berenice. Then he begins to describe in graphic detail Buddy’s dismemberment and his

belief that Buddy had wanted Joe Lon to know something, but Buddy died before he could say. As Joe Lon processes Buddy's death and Shep's insinuation that Buddy's last words were intended for him, he looks up in the stands and Mother Well and Victor "were staring right into his eyes and he couldn't look away" (Crews 159). All his wrongdoing is before him. The reality of death is before him. Victor's talk of God and heaven and the serpent "boomed into the pit" (Crews 159), and the weight of Mystic's judgement descends on Joe Lon until he releases all his emotions in a howl. Tuffy joins Joe Lon's howling, and it appears they lament their condition in unison "looking into the same blue empty piece of sky" (Crews 160). Joe Lon's conscience slips away and his instinctual behavior takes over. For a time, Joe Lon is in a liminal state between madness and sanity.

When Joe Lon awakens, he tries to make sense of what has happened, of who he is and what kind of future he has. He recalls his feelings of agonizing fear in the pit: "He was miserable beyond measure. Everything seemed to be coming apart. He could see the frayed and ragged seams of everything slowly unraveling" (Crews 161). He envisions being back in the confines of the pit and having to listen to "everybody he'd ever known filing past to tell him how he'd failed" (Crews 162). He attempts to return to his position as Tuffy's caretaker in the fight, but as on the football field, Willard has taken over his role. His identity within the community is slowly disappearing.

In turn, having just done battle with his symbolic devils and lost, Joe Lon watches Tuffy take on his adversary, Devil. Late in the fight, Tuffy is mortally wounded and turns rather than face off again. Fighting under the Louisiana rules, Big Joe could pull Tuffy from the fight rather than "take a killing." Instead, Joe Lon witnesses the

consequences of weakness as he watches his father storm down to the pit “the tails of his enormous black coat flapping behind him” and kick the dog to death while he and the crowd howl. Tails, unbridled rage, and more howling convey the animal imagery that contrasts against Big Joe and the crowd’s ritualizing humanity. Sharing an identity with Tuffy, Joe Lon believes the same fate awaits him.

Later that night, “the moment” transpires of which O’Connor speaks and “the presence of grace can be felt as it waits to be accepted or rejected, even though the reader may not recognize this moment” (MM 118). While it is not a moment divine grace, perhaps, it is an unmerited act of forgiveness and an offer of hope. The tenderness of the scene stands in such contrast to the harsh physicality of the rest of the novel that it leaps from the page. Joe Lon eases “himself carefully on the bed beside Elfie” (Crews 170). His mindful and gingerly manner is very different from the previous descriptions of Joe Lon’s thoughtless and rash behavior in this bed. Elfie reaches out and takes his hand, “and he let her hold it” (Crews 170). Elfie’s gentle touch serves as a literal and figurative connection to his humanity, but while he receives it, he does not reciprocate. She assures him that “things will be different tomorrow” and if he were to heed the undertone of her offer of an alternative community, that of family, it could be. He passively responds, “All right,” but in his mind, “he knew and accepted for the first time that things would not be different tomorrow. Or ever” (Crews 170). Although he admits “there were a lot of things [he] could do,” he forsakes them all including “[going] nuts trying to pretend things would someday be different” (Crews 170). Rejecting hope and rejecting insanity, Joe Lon is left with the options to kill or be killed.

The next morning at the onset of the roundup, Joe Lon determines his own fate.

He takes the gun from his truck and without saying a word, begins shooting. Through his murderous rampage, we see the physical culmination of Joe Lon's inward decision. By exercising his power to kill, he momentarily regains a false sense of control. Jeffrey concludes that "Joe Lon's first three victims are by no means random targets; he murders characters who represent religion, law, and love" (50). By shooting Victor, Luther, Berenice, and, finally, a random hunter, he rids himself of the corrupt forces of the community that wield power over him. Victor, who represents the embodiment of the Christ-haunted South, appears to possess strength and sincerity in his faith, but he, too, is caught up in the spectacle of the snake roundup festival. Boldly spouting out religious phrases, he fails to compassionately engage Joe Lon, or anyone else for that matter, in a manner that would demonstrate a sincere concern for the state of his soul.

In matters of love, Ken Hanssen concludes that love has figuratively castrated Joe Lon, first through his mother's affair and subsequent suicide, and then with Bernice's careless affection and eventual abandonment (110). Hence, her death represents his reclamation of his masculinity. Luther, as Buddy Matlow's complicit replacement, refuses to exert his power as the law over the raucous crowd and allows their pandemonium to nearly destroy the town. Therefore, he represents the corruption of law in his refusal to enforce it. Lastly, the snake hunter represents the mob that has taken this community ritual and turned it into a debacle. In his last conversation with Beeder, Joe Lon laments, "I wish we didn't have to do this. I wish I'd never heard of a rattle snake" (Crews 173). Signifying their powerlessness over their lives, Beeder responds with one of their father's sayings: "Wish in one hand and shit in the other and see which one fills up first" (Crews 173). Through his murderous rampage, he briefly reclaims power and

control over his life, dissociates himself from the community and asserts his self, which Franchot notes is the key to the possibility of personal transcendence (836).

Eventually out of bullets, the mob descends on Joe Lon. As a threat to their way of life, he must be sacrificed in order to preserve it. They raise him up and throw him in the snake pit. In a picture of baptism, Joe Lon goes down in the pit then briefly rises as “snakes hung from his face” (Crews 177). His death is a physical representation of his life mired in the community’s deification and worship of the snake and the consequence of his attempt to reclaim his self. In a brief final scene, Joe Lon sees, or thinks he sees, Beeder and Lottie Mae off in the distance. Rather than “mythic goddesses looking down on the scene,” this vision may likely represent Joe Lon’s desire to save Beeder: “He had never been able to shake the feeling though that if he caught her off guard and said just the right thing in just the right way, he would save her” (Crews 48). Whether real or imagined, the presence of Beeder and Lottie Mae represents a kind of blessing from the two other abused figures who have acted to remove themselves from the corruption of the community.

Ultimately, *A Feast of Snakes* represents the worst of the Christ-haunted South. Mystic has all but eliminated traces of the Christian narrative from their religious practices. Instead they have gone so far as to turn the snake, the Christian representation of evil, into its deity. By worshipping the snake and violence, they forgo the order that religion is intended to provide. Instead, Mystic is overrun with mayhem. The law is corrupt and therefore, inconsequential. Subsequently, the community’s victims are numerous, but for those few like Joe Lon, there is power and indulgence without consequences. Victor, as a visiting preacher, should be a Christ-centered example in this

fallen world, but he, too, is corrupted by the spectacle of the snake. Not fully engaging with the community, but not expressly differentiating himself from it, he represents the Laodicean Christian. On the other hand, Joe Lon has zealously devoted himself to the worship of the snake and violence. He dedicates himself to football and attains the position of “Boss Snake.” But the festering rot of discontent will not leave him be. Eventually, he finds his immersion in the community is keeping him from addressing what “ails” him. He determines that he must detach himself from the community in order to achieve any hope for transcendence, for feeling “better” (Crews 176). In so doing, he becomes a target of the community, sacrificed so that Mystic’s community may continue.

Chapter IV

CONCLUSION

As the catalyst for this analysis, O'Connor's quote contends the South is a Christ-haunted community. In one sense, the haunting represents a generic biblical knowledge operating as a basis for a moral code and a shared culture on the perimeters of society. In "A Good Man is Hard to Find," the grandmother is the embodiment of this "Christ-hauntedness." She is unable to engage with the Misfit on an appropriate religious level because the doctrinal questions he poses are beyond what she has even considered. She has based her religion on the community's framework of outward appearances and the superficiality of manners and civility. As a result, when the Misfit confronts her with his own barrage of spiritual ponderings, the grandmother's brittle religious foundation crumbles. At first, she appeals to his membership of that society by elevating herself to the "good" position of a lady who no one would shoot and then she appeals to him professing to know his heart and declaring him a "good" man and "not a bit common" (CS 133). She insists that he pray to Jesus for help, perhaps demonstrating her knowledge that God is a "very present help in times of trouble" (ESV, Psalms 46.1). However, she does not pray at any point for the physical salvation of her family or herself. Thus, we see the hypocrisy of the Christ-haunted South through the grandmother's inability to apply biblical teaching to her life. Eventually, she reaches a place of doubt as she cannot resolve the enormity of the situation with her limited religious reservoir.

In *A Feast of Snakes*, Big Joe and Victor function in a manner similar to the grandmother. As a deacon in his church, Big Joe should be a godly example for Joe Lon to follow. Instead, he consistently demonstrates his hypocrisy by chiding Joe Lon for the very behavior that he is blatantly guilty of. He urges his son to go to church, but because of the disconnection of Big Joe's words and actions, Joe Lon recognizes the impotence of religion in his father's life and will not go. Victor, on the other hand, appears to practice what he preaches, and this quality initially prompts Joe Lon to question his life and to desire what he perceives as Victor's joy in relentless pursuit of God (Crews 102).

However, Victor remains on the perimeter despite Joe Lon's reverence for him. Victor has numerous opportunities to engage Joe Lon in a spiritual discourse, but he remains aloof. His religious proclamations are not directed toward Joe Lon or anyone in particular. When Joe Lon is in the pit overwhelmed by desperation, Victor could choose to help Joe Lon, perhaps provide religious counsel; instead, we learn that buying snakes was his primary concern during Joe Lon's public breakdown (Crews 161). Consequently, even though Victor appears to be a "good" man in comparison to the words and deeds of the other men in Mystic, he only offers Joe Lon a semblance of the Christian narrative.

In the second part of O'Connor's quote, she claims that there are ghosts in the Christ-haunted South that can be "fierce and instructive" (MM 45). As laid out in the introduction, we now look at the three ways in which these ghosts seek to educate the characters of these southern texts. Initially, the ghosts serve as a reminder of Christian truths. "In a Good Man," the reminder of those truths comes through a nihilist. The Misfit, not the grandmother, is the character with the clear understanding that the call of the Christian is not one of superficiality, of cultural etiquette, or merely saying and doing

the perceived right thing; rather, it is a radical decision to deny one's self, take up his personal cross daily, and follow Christ with total abandon (ESV, Luke 9.23). In *A Feast of Snakes*, the ghosts of Christian truths are in Victor's announcements. While random and lacking in the full development of a sermon, he does convey the Christian truths of Satan's deception which leads to original sin and the forgiveness of sins through the covenant of Christ's sacrifice (Crews 76, 159). However ambiguous, the essential Christian message of sin and salvation is present.

Additionally, these ghosts inform the Misfit and Joe Lon of their sinful nature. The men share an ambiguous attitude toward specific sins in their lives, but they both maintain an overall sense of guilt. The Misfit simultaneously admits wrongdoing while protesting the consequences he has suffered. He claims he cannot remember what he did to be sent to prison and believes he has been overly penalized because he cannot "make what all [he] done wrong fit what all [he] gone through in punishment" (CS 130). Still he laments that if he could have witnessed Christ's resurrection he would not be as he is (CS132). This confession indicates that he knows what he does is wrong. Joe Lon bears a similar amnesia of his transgressions. He believes that God is punishing him and "assumed he had done *something*, and that he would never find out what it was" (Crews 57). Joe Lon is also dissatisfied with himself and wishes he wasn't such a "son of a bitch" to his wife (Crews 12). Essentially, their self-awareness of generic guilt and their overall discontent with their state of being is representative of the narrative of original sin, and their refusal to confess exposes their pride, which prohibits them from experiencing any significant change.

Finally, the ghosts warn of death's imminence and certainty. The snakes' symbolic representation of evil cannot be ignored in each story's final scene. The Misfit's snake is metaphorical; at the grandmother's touch, he "sprang back as if a snake had bitten him" (CS 132). His figurative encounter signifies how fearful he is by the literal offer of grace extended through the grandmother's words and physical touch. He impulsively recoils from it. For Joe Lon, his shooting spree represents his choice to revert to violence in exchange for a brief moment to feel "better than he had ever felt in his life" (Crews 176). In killing those representations of the corrupted forces of religion, love, and law, he inadvertently acts as a savior to those who would be victimized by them. In their last conversation, he tells Beeder he wishes that they did not have to do "this" and that he wishes he'd "never heard of a rattlesnake" (Crews 173). Beeder responds with one of their father's sayings: "Wish in one hand and shit in the other, see which one fills up first" (Crews 173). Therefore, his murder of the nameless hunter is his attempt to rectify the ominous spectacle of the snake roundup. As a result, the mob not only determines him to be an imminent threat, but he becomes a foreboding menace to their way of life. Therefore, Joe Lon is sacrificed by being tossed into the snake pit and the last image of him is rising from the pit, evoking an image of resurrection, with "snakes [hanging] from his face" (Crews 177). We may presume a glimmer of hope, as O'Connor did, for the Misfit has a future, but for Joe Lon, we cannot surmise that a mustard seed may grow with time or that he may see the error of his ways. His story ends.

Ultimately, "A Good Man is Hard to Find" and *A Feast of Snakes* specifically challenge those within the Christian community to recognize, criticize, and shape the

myths by which they live. It is necessary then for the critical-minded Christian community to engage in texts that it may deem “inappropriate” in order to better understand the perception that those outside of the Christian community have of them. More importantly, it suggests that Christ-haunted communities that are spiritually bereft and engaged in mere spectacle need to accept responsibility for the victims that are often a result of its culture and address those failures head on. Only after they become aware of such perceptions, can they attempt to rectify their shortcomings.

In terms of future scholarship, this thesis provides a three-tier method by which to explore religion in American literature. First, by addressing the interior life of characters as Jenny Franchot suggests, this thesis affirms that mystery, conscience, and the possibility of transcendence can be explored even in the most deterministic of environments. Secondly, Robert Detweiler’s work helps in the examination of religious community in texts. Using religious reading response, we can read texts with respect to community and how the elements of myths, rituals, and festivals work together in creating the culture of religious communities and assess them accordingly based on the impact those elements have. Finally, in Luke Ferretter’s work, we are given a framework by which the Christian community can actively and effectively engage in scholarly criticism in an effort to bridge the gap between religion in culture and religion in the academic discourse of American literature. By actively engaging texts in such a manner, literary criticism will more authentically reflect the religious culture portrayed in American literature and consequently, dispel the ignorance of the “invisibles.”

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