
Unit 2.4 □ *Sula* : Toni Morrison

Structure

- 2.4.0 Text : *Sula*
- 2.4.1 About the Author
- 2.4.2 Morrison's Works and Contemporary Milieu
- 2.4.3 As a Black Woman Writer
- 2.4.4 Analysis : *Sula*
 - (i) Introduction
 - (ii) Structure
 - (iii) Character
 - (iv) Images
 - (v) Female Bonding
- 2.4.5 Questions
- 2.4.6 Select Bibliography

2.4.0 □ Text : *Sula*

It was too cool for ice cream. A hill wind was blowing dust and empty Camels wrappers about their ankles. It pushed their dresses into the creases of their behinds, then lifted the hems to peek at their cotton underwear. They were on their way to Edna Finch's Mellow House, an ice-cream parlor catering to nice folks—where even children would feel comfortable, you know, even though it was right next to Reba's Grill and just one block down from the Time and a Half Pool Hall. It sat in the curve of Carpenter's Road, which, in four blocks, made up all the sporting life available in the Bottom. Old men and young ones draped themselves in front of the Elmira Theater, Irene's Palace of Cosmetology, the pool hall, the grill and the other sagging business enterprises that lined the street. On sills, on stoops, on crates and broken chairs they sat tasting their teeth and waiting for something to distract them. Every passerby, every motorcar, every alteration in stance caught their

attention and was commented on. Particularly they watched women. When a woman approached, the older men tipped their hats; the younger ones opened and closed their thighs. But all of them, whatever their age, watched her retreating view with interest.

Nel and Sula walked through this valley of eyes chilled by the wind and heated by the embarrassment of appraising stares. The old men looked at their stalklike legs, dwelled on the cords in the backs of their knees and remembered old dance steps they had not done in twenty years. In their lust, which age had turned to kindness, they moved their lips as though to stir up the taste of young sweat on tight skin.

Pig meat. The words were in all their minds. And one of them, one of the young ones, said it aloud. Softly but definitively and there was no mistaking the compliment. His "name was Ajax, a twenty-one-year-old pool haunt of sinister beauty. Graceful and economical in every movement, he held a place of envy with men of all ages for his magnificently foul mouth. In fact he seldom cursed, and the epithets he chose were dull, even harmless. His reputation was derived from the way he handled the words. When he said "hell" he hit the *h* with his lungs and the impact was greater than the achievement of the most imaginative foul mouth in the town. He could say "shit" with a nastiness impossible to imitate. So, when he said "pig meat" as Nel and Sula passed, they guarded their eyes lest someone see their delight.

It was not really Edna Finch's ice cream that made them brave the stretch of those panther eyes. Years later their own eyes would glaze as they cupped their chins in remembrance of the inchworm smiles, the squatting haunches, the track-rail legs straddling broken chairs. The cream-colored trousers marking with a mere seam the place where the mystery curled. Those smooth vanilla crotches invited them; those lemon-yellow gabardines beckoned to them.

They moved toward the ice-cream parlor like tightrope walkers, as thrilled by the possibility of a slip as by the maintenance of tension and balance. The least sideways glance, the merest toe stub, could pitch them into those creamy haunches spread wide with welcome. Somewhere beneath all of that daintiness, chambered in all that neatness, lay the thing that clotted their dreams.

Which was only fitting, for it was in dreams that the two girls had first met. Long before Edna Finch's Mellow House opened, even before they marched through the chocolate halls of Garfield Primary School out onto the playground and stood facing each other through the ropes of the one vacant swing ("Go on." "No. You go."), they had already made each other's

acquaintance in the delirium of their noon dreams. They were solitary little girls whose loneliness was so profound it intoxicated them and sent them stumbling into Technicolored visions that always included a presence, a someone, who, quite like the dreamer, shared the delight of the dream. When Nel, an only child, sat on the steps of her back porch surrounded by the high silence of her mother's incredibly orderly house, feeling the neatness pointing at her back, she studied the poplars and fell easily into a picture of herself lying on a flowered bed, tangled in her own hair, waiting for some fiery prince. He approached but never quite arrived. But always, watching the dream along with her, were some smiling sympathetic eyes. Someone as interested as she herself in the flow of her imagined hair, the thickness of the mattress of flowers, the voile sleeves that closed below her elbows in gold-threaded cuffs.

Similarly, Sula, also an only child, but wedged into a household of throbbing disorder constantly awry with things, people, voices and the slamming of doors, spent hours in the attic behind a roll of linoleum galloping through her own mind on a gray-and-white horse tasting sugar and smelling roses in full view of a someone who shared both the taste and the speed.

So when they met, first in those chocolate halls and next through the ropes of the swing, they felt the ease and comfort of old friends. Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be. Their meeting was fortunate, for it let them use each other to grow on. Daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers (Sula's because he was dead; Nel's because he wasn't), they found in each other's eyes the intimacy they were looking for.

Nel Wright and Sula Peace were both twelve in 1922, wishbone thin and easy-assed. Nel was the color of wet sandpaper—just dark enough to escape the blows of the pitch-black truebloods and the contempt of old women who worried about such things as bad blood mixtures and knew that the origins of a mule and a mulatto were one and the same. Had she been any lighter-skinned she would have needed either her mother's protection on the way to school or a streak of mean to defend herself. Sula was a heavy brown with large quiet eyes, one of which featured a birthmark that spread from the middle of the lid toward the eyebrow, shaped something like a stemmed rose. It gave her otherwise plain face a broken excitement and blue-blade threat like the keloid¹ scar of the razored man who sometimes played checkers

1. An excessive growth of scar tissue.

with her grandmother. The birthmark was to grow darker as the years passed, but now it was the same shade as her gold-flecked eyes, which, to the end, were as steady and clean as rain.

Their friendship was as intense as it was sudden. They found relief in each other's personality. Although both were unshaped, formless things, Nel seemed stronger and more consistent than Sula, who could hardly be counted on to sustain any emotion for more than three minutes. Yet there was one time when that was not true, when she held on to a mood for weeks, but even that was in defense of Nel.

Four white boys in their early teens, sons of some newly arrived Irish people, occasionally entertained themselves in the afternoon by harassing black schoolchildren. With shoes that pinched and woolen knickers that made red rings on their calves, they had come to this valley with their parents believing as they did that it was a promised land—green and shimmering with welcome. What they found was a strange accent, a pervasive fear of their religion and firm resistance to their attempts to find work. With one exception the older residents of Medallion scorned them. The one exception was the black community. Although some of the Negroes had been in Medallion before the Civil War (the town didn't even have a name then), if they had any hatred for these newcomers it didn't matter because it didn't show. As a matter of fact, baiting them was the one activity that the white Protestant residents concurred in. In part their place in this world was secured only when they echoed the old residents' attitude toward blacks.

These particular boys caught Nel once, and pushed her from hand to hand until they grew tired of the frightened helpless face. Because of that incident, Nel's route home from school became elaborate. She, and then Sula, managed to duck them for weeks until a chilly day in November when Sula said, "Let's us go on home the shortest way."

Nel blinked, but acquiesced. They walked up the street until they got to the bend of Carpenter's Road where the boys lounged on a disused well. Spotting their prey, the boys sauntered forward as though there were nothing in the world on their minds but the gray sky. Hardly able to control their grins, they stood like a gate blocking the path. When the girls were three feet in front of the boys, Sula reached into her coat pocket and pulled out Eva's paring knife. The boys stopped short, exchanged looks and dropped all pretense of innocence. This was going to be better than they thought. They were going to try and fight back, and with a knife. Maybe they could get an arm around one of their waists, or tear . . .

Sula squatted down in the dirt road and put everything down on the ground : her lunchpail, her reader, her mittens, her slate. Holding the knife in her right hand, she pulled the slate toward her and pressed her left forefinger down hard on its edge. Her aim was determined but inaccurate. She slashed off only the tip of her finger. The four boys stared open-mouthed at the wound and the scrap of flesh, like a button mushroom, curling in the cherry blood that ran into the corners of the slate.

Sula raised her eyes to them. Her voice was quiet. "If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I'll do to you?"

The shifting dirt was the only way Nel knew that they were moving away; she was looking at Sula's face, which seemed miles and miles away.

But toughness was not their quality—adventuresomeness was—and a mean determination to explore everything that interested them, from one-eyed chickens high-stepping in their penned yards to Mr. Buckland Reed's gold teeth, from the sound of sheets flapping in the wind to the labels on Tar Baby's wine bottles. And they had no priorities. They could be distracted from watching a fight with mean razors by the glorious smell of hot tar being poured by roadmen two hundred yards away.

In the safe harbor of each other's company they could afford to abandon the ways of other people and concentrate on their own perceptions of things. When Mrs. Wright reminded Nel to pull her nose, she would do it enthusiastically but without the least hope in the world.

"While you sittin' there, honey, go 'head and pull your nose."

"It hurts, Mamma."

"Don't you want a nice nose when you grow up?"

After she met Sula, Nel slid the clothespin under the blanket as soon as she got in the bed. And although there was still the hateful hot comb to suffer through each Saturday evening, its consequences—smooth hair—no longer interested her.

Joined in mutual admiration they watched each day as though it were a movie arranged for their amusement. The new theme they were now discovering was men. So they met regularly, without even planning it, to walk down the road to Edna Finch's Mellow House, even though it was too cool for ice cream.

Then summer came. A summer limp with the weight of blossomed things. Heavy sunflowers weeping over fences; iris curling and browning at the edges far away from their purple hearts; ears of corn letting their auburn

hair wind down to their stalks. And the boys. The beautiful, beautiful boys who dotted the landscape like jewels, split the air with their shouts in the field, and thickened the river with their shining wet backs. Even their footsteps left a smell of smoke behind.

It was in that summer, the summer of their twelfth year, the summer of the beautiful black boys, that they became skittish, frightened and bold—all at the same time.

In that mercury mood in July, Sula and Nel wandered about the Bottom barefoot looking for mischief. They decided to go down by the river where the boys sometimes swam. Nel waited on the porch of 7 Carpenter's Road while Sula ran into the house to go to the toilet. On the way up the stairs, she passed the kitchen where Hannah sat with two friends, Patsy and Valentine. The two women were fanning themselves and watching Hannah put down some dough, all talking casually about one thing and another, and had gotten around, when Sula passed by, to the problems of child rearing.

"They a pain."

"Yeh. Wish I'd listened to mamma. She told me not to have 'em too soon."

"Any time atall is too soon for me."

"Oh, I don't know. My Rudy minds his daddy. He just wild with me. Be glad when he growed and gone."

Hannah smiled and said, "Shut your mouth. You love the ground he pee on."

"Sure I do. But he still a pain. Can't help loving your own child. No matter what they do."

"Well, Hester grown now and I can't say love is exactly what I feel."

"Sure you do. You love her, like I love Sula. I just don't like her. That's the difference."

"Guess so. Likin' them is another thing."

"Sure. They different people, you know . . ."

She only heard Hannah's words, and the pronouncement sent her flying up the stairs. In bewilderment, she stood at the window fingering the curtain edge, aware of a sting in her eye. Nel's call floated up and into the window, pulling her away from dark thoughts back into the bright, hot daylight.

They ran most of the way.

Heading toward the wide part of the river where trees grouped themselves in families darkening the earth below. They passed some boys

swimming and clowning in the water, shrouding their words in laughter.

They ran in the sunlight, creating their own breeze, which pressed their dresses into their damp skin. Reaching a kind of square of four leaf-locked trees which promised cooling, they flung themselves into the four-cornered shade to taste their lip sweat and contemplate the wildness that had come upon them so suddenly. They lay in the grass, their foreheads almost touching, their bodies stretched away from each other at a 180-degree angle. Sula's head rested on her arm, an undone braid coiled around her wrist. Nel leaned on her elbows and worried long blades of grass with her fingers. Underneath their dresses flesh tightened and shivered in the high coolness, their small breasts just now beginning to create some pleasant discomfort when they were lying on their stomachs.

Sula lifted her head and joined Nel in the grass play. In concert, without ever meeting each other's eyes, they stroked the blades up and down, up and down. Nel found a thick twig and, with her thumbnail, pulled away its bark until it was stripped to a smooth, creamy innocence. Sula looked about and found one too. When both twigs were undressed Nel moved easily to the next stage and began tearing up rooted grass to make a bare spot of earth. When a generous clearing was made, Sula traced intricate patterns in it with her twig. At first Nel was content to do the same. But soon she grew impatient and poked her twig rhythmically and intensely into the earth, making a small neat hole that grew deeper and wider with the least manipulation of her twig. Sula copied her, and soon each had a hole the size of a cup. Nel began a more strenuous digging and, rising to her knee, was careful to scoop out the dirt as she made her hole deeper. Together they worked until the two holes were one and the same. When the depression was the size of a small dishpan, Nel's twig broke. With a gesture of disgust she threw the pieces into the hole they had made. Sula threw hers in too. Nel saw a bottle cap and tossed it in as well. Each then looked around for more debris to throw into the hole : paper, bits of glass, butts of cigarettes, until all of the small defiling things they could find were collected there. Carefully they replaced the soil and covered the entire grave with uprooted grass.

Neither one had spoken a word.

They stood up, stretched, then gazed out over the swift dull water as an unspeakable restlessness and agitation held them. At the same instant each girl heard footsteps in the grass. A little boy in too big knickers was coming up from the lower bank of the river. He stopped when he saw them and picked his nose.

"Your mamma tole you to stop eatin' snot, Chicken," Nel hollered at him through cupped hands.

"Shut up," he said, still picking.

"Come up here and say that."

"Leave him 'lone, Nel. Come here, Chicken. Lemme show you something."

"Naw."

"You scared we gone take your bugger away?"

"Leave him 'lone, I said. Come on, Chicken. Look. I'll help you climb a tree."

Chicken looked at the tree Sula was pointing to—a big double beech with low branches and lots of bends for sitting.

He moved slowly toward her.

"Come on, Chicken, I'll help you up."

Still picking his nose, his eyes wide, he came to where they were standing. Sula took him by the hand and coaxed him along. When they reached the base of the beech, she lifted him to the first branch, saying, "Go on. Go on. I got you." She followed the boy, steadying him, when he needed it, with her hand and her reassuring voice. When they were as high as they could go, Sula pointed to the far side of the river.

"See? Bet you never saw that far before, did you?"

"Uh uh."

"Now look down there." They both leaned a little and peered through the leaves at Nel standing below, squinting up at them. From their height she looked small and foreshortened.

Chicken Little laughed.

"Y'all better come on down before you break your neck," Nel hollered.

"I ain't never coming down," the boy hollered back.

"Yeah. We better. Come on, Chicken."

"Naw. Lemme go."

"Yeah, Chicken. Come on, now."

Sula pulled his leg gently.

"Lemme go."

"OK, I'm leavin' you." She started on.

"Wait!" he screamed.

Sula stopped and together they slowly worked their way down.

Chicken was still elated. "I was way up there, wasn't I? Wasn't I? I'm a tell my brovver."

Sula and Nel began to mimic him: "I'm a tell my brovver; I'm a tell my brovver."

Sula picked him up by his hands and swung him outward then around and around. His knickers ballooned and his shrieks of frightened joy startled the birds and the fat grasshoppers. When he slipped from her hands and sailed away out over the water they could still hear his bubbly laughter.

The water darkened and closed quickly over the place where Chicken Little sank. The pressure of his hard and tight little fingers was still in Sula's palms as she stood looking at the closed place in the water. They expected him to come back up, laughing. Both girls stared at the water.

Nel spoke first. "Somebody saw." A figure appeared briefly on the opposite shore.

The only house over there was Shadrack's. Sula glanced at Nel. Terror widened her nostrils. Had he seen?

The water was so peaceful now. There was nothing but the baking sun and something newly missing. Sula cupped her face for an instant, then turned and ran up to the little plank bridge that crossed the river to Shadrack's house. There was no path. It was as though neither Shadrack nor anyone else ever came this way.

Her running was swift and determined, but when she was close to the three little steps that led to his porch, fear crawled into her stomach and only the something newly missing back there in the river made it possible for her to walk up the three steps and knock at the door.

No one answered. She started back, but thought again of the peace of the river. Shadrack would be inside, just behind the door ready to pounce on her. Still she could not go back. Ever so gently she pushed the door with the tips of her fingers and heard only the hinges weep. More. And then she was inside. Alone. The neatness, the order startled her, but more surprising was the restfulness. Everything was so tiny, so common, so unthreatening. Perhaps this was not the house of the Shad. The terrible Shad who walked about with his penis out, who peed in front of ladies and girl-children, the only black who could curse white people and get away with it, who drank in the road from the mouth of the bottle, who shouted and shook in the streets. This cottage? This sweet old cottage? With its made-up bed? With its rag rug and wooden table? Sula stood in the middle of the little room and in her wonder forgot what she had come for until a sound at the door made her jump. He was there in the doorway looking at her. She had not heard his coming and now he was looking at her.

More in embarrassment than terror she averted her glance. When she

called up enough courage to look back at him, she saw his hand resting upon the door frame. His fingers, barely touching the wood, were arranged in a graceful arc. Relieved and encouraged (no one with hands like that, no one with fingers that curved around wood so tenderly could kill her), she walked past him out of the door, feeling his gaze turning, turning with her.

At the edge of the porch, gathering the wisps of courage that were fast leaving her, she turned once more to look at him, to ask him . . . had he . . . ?

He was smiling, a great smile, heavy with lust and time to come. He nodded his head as though answering a question, and said, in a pleasant conversational tone, a tone of cooled butter, "Always."

Sula fled down the steps, and shot through the greenness and the baking sun back to Nel and the dark closed place in the water. There she collapsed in tears.

Nel quieted her. "Sh, sh. Don't, don't. You didn't mean it. It ain't your fault. Sh. Sh. Come on, le's go, Sula. Come on, now. Was he there? Did he see? Where's the belt to your dress?"

Sula shook her head while she searched her waist for the belt.

Finally she stood up and allowed Nel to lead her away. "He said, 'Always. Always.'"

"What?"

Sula covered her mouth as they walked down the hill. Always. He had answered a question she had not asked, and its promise licked at her feet.

A bargeman, poling away from the shore, found Chicken late that afternoon stuck in some rocks and weeds, his knickers ballooning about his legs. He would have left him there but noticed that it was a child, not an old black man, as it first appeared, and he prodded the body loose, netted it and hauled it aboard. He shook his head in disgust at the kind of parents who would drown their own children. When, he wondered, will those people ever be anything but animals, fit for nothing but substitutes for mules, only mules didn't kill each other the way niggers did. He dumped Chicken Little into a burlap sack and tossed him next to some egg crates and boxes of wool cloth. Later, sitting down to smoke on an empty lard tin, still bemused by God's curse and the terrible burden his own kind had of elevating Ham's sons,² he suddenly became alarmed by the thought that the corpse in this

2. Ham, son of Noah and father of Canaan, was traditionally the ancestor of the black race (cf. Genesis ix: 25-26).

heat would have a terrible odor, which might get into the fabric of his woolen cloth. He dragged the sack away and hooked it over the side, so that the Chicken's body was half in and half out of the water.

Wiping the sweat from his neck, he reported his find to the sheriff at Porter's Landing, who said they didn't have no niggers in their county, but that some lived in those hills 'cross the river, up above Medallion. The bargeman said he couldn't go all the way back there, it was every bit of two miles. The sheriff said whyn't he throw it on back into the water. The bargeman said he never shoulda taken it out in the first place. Finally they got the man who ran the ferry twice a day to agree to take it over in the morning.

That was why Chicken Little was missing for three days and didn't get to the embalmer's until the fourth day, by which time he was unrecognizable to almost everybody who once knew him, and even his mother wasn't deep down sure, except that it just had to be him since nobody could find him. When she saw his clothes lying on the table in the basement of the mortuary, her mouth snapped shut, and when she saw his body her mouth flew wide open again and it was seven hours before she was able to close it and make the first sound.

So the coffin was closed.

The Junior Choir, dressed in white, sang "Nearer My God to Thee" and "Precious Memories," their eyes fastened on the songbooks they did not need, for this was the first time their voices had presided at a real-life event.

Nel and Sula did not touch hands or look at each other during the funeral. There was a space, a separateness, between them. Nel's legs had turned to granite and she expected the sheriff or Reverend Deal's pointing finger at any moment. Although she knew she had "done nothing," she felt convicted and hanged right there in the pew—two rows down from her parents in the children's section.

Sula simply cried. Soundlessly and with no heaving and gasping for breath, she let the tears roll into her mouth and slide down her chin to dot the front of her dress.

As Reverend Deal moved into his sermon, the hands of the women unfolded like pairs of raven's wings and flew high above their hats in the air. They did not hear all of what he said; they heard the one word, or phrase, or inflection that was for them the connection between the event and themselves. For some it was the term "Sweet Jesus." And they saw the Lamb's eye and the truly innocent victim: themselves. They acknowledged the innocent child hiding in the corner of their hearts, holding a sugar-and-butter

sandwich. That one. The one who lodged deep in their fat, thin, old, young skin, and was the one the world had hurt. Or they thought of their son newly killed and remembered his legs in short pants and wondered where the bullet went in. Or they remembered how dirty the room looked when their father left home and wondered if that is the way the slim, young Jew felt, he who for them was both son and lover and in whose downy face they could see the sugar-and-butter sandwiches and feel the oldest and most devastating pain there is: not the pain of childhood, but the remembrance of it.

Then they left their pews. For with some emotions one has to stand. They spoke, for they were full and needed to say. They swayed, for the rivulets of grief or of ecstasy must be rocked. And when they thought of all that life and death locked into that little closed coffin they danced and screamed, not to protest God's will but to acknowledge it and confirm once more their conviction that the only way to avoid the Hand of God is to get in it.

In the colored part of the cemetery, they sank Chicken Little in between his grandfather and an aunt. Butterflies flew in and out of the bunches of field flowers now loosened from the top of the bier and lying in a small heap at the edge of the grave. The head had gone, but there was still no breeze to lift the hair of the willows.

Nel and Sula stood some distance away from the grave, the space that had sat between them in the pews had dissolved. They held hands and knew that only the coffin would lie in the earth; the bubbly laughter and the press of fingers in the palm would stay aboveground forever. At first, as they stood there, their hands were clenched together. They relaxed slowly until during the walk back home their fingers were laced in as gentle a clasp as that of any two young girlfriends trotting up the road on a summer day wondering what happened to butterflies in the winter.

1973

2.4.1. About the Author

Toni Morrison was born Chloe Anthony Wafford in Lorain, Ohio. After graduating from high school she attended Howard University, earning her B.A. in 1953. Two years later, with an M.A. in English from Cornell University, she began a teaching career and left for the Texas Southern University. She stayed there from 1955 through 1957 and then went back to Howard from

1957 to 1964. During these years in Howard, she met and married Harold Morrison and began to write fiction seriously. Accepting an editorial position with Random House, she totally abandoned teaching as a full time career and was soon a senior editor in New York. In 1984 she was appointed to an endowment chair at the State University of New York at Albany and in 1989 to a similar position in Princeton.

Toni Morrison is a pathbreaker : She states :

The language has to be quite, it has to engage your participation. The reader supplies the emotions. My language has to have holes and spaces to the reader can come into it.

2.4.2 Morrison's Works and Contemporary Milieu

Toni Morrison's novels – *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby* reveal the trauma of the Black experience in America. The discrepancy between 'white' and 'black' perverted social existence at all its levels. The superiority of the 'white' is reinforced by the Christian ideas of fair and foul. We recall the little black boy in Blake's poem who had said "But I am dark as if bereft of light." The pain and the disease of never being accepted spread from the level of unequal social intercourse, into the very core of the beings of the black women Morrison portrays so intensely. June Jordan in her book *Some Changes*, presents an unique vision of black womanhood. She says :

To be black and to be a woman is to be a double outsider, to be twice oppressed, to be more than invisible. That's a triple vision.

Black women in America are triply burdened by racial, sexual and class prejudices, and are forced to occupy a marginalized place in a patriarchal society.

In each of Toni Morrison's novels unfolds a horrific tale, sagas of pain and disillusionment of a class of people ever prone to racial discrimination. The predicament of the Blacks in America is pitiful.

Among her earliest novels *Song of Solomon* (1977) has received the most praise. A complex narrative, rich in myth and symbol, it follows with Faulknerian intensity a northern man's search for the southern sources of his identity, his most significant clue a folk song about a black man who could fly.

The Bluest Eye (1970) and *Sula* (1973) are much shorter works, are also mythically and symbolically suggestive, with women as the central characters. Together, these three books explore a world mostly rural and black, centred

in a northern town very like Morrison's hometown—Lorain. Weird situations of life, loneliness and pain are everywhere. Sudden, inexplicable violence explodes in all her novels, but endurance and great love are also present, expressed in remarkable ways.

In *Tar Baby* (1981), Morrison examines a more sophisticated society, bringing blacks and whites together in Paris, on a Caribbean Island and in New York.

In the widely acclaimed *Beloved* (1987), where the locale is set in rural Ohio not long after the Civil War, she tells of a mother an escaped slave. This unfortunate woman is haunted by the teenage ghost of the baby daughter she killed to keep it from the slave-catcher's hands. Winner of the Pulitzer Prize, *Beloved* is the first novel in an intricately planned trilogy. It is considered to be a catalyst for Morrison's Nobel Prize for Literature; and differs in both theme and attitude from familiar tales of revolt-leading male slaves (versions of which began in 1853 with Frederick Douglass' *The Heroic Slave*. Sethe, the female ex-slave who had killed her child to save it from slavery, remains one of the most vibrant and memorable of characters ever portrayed in American Literature.

Jazz (1992) revolves around the love, hate and compulsion of Joe, a cosmetic salesman, his sterile wife, Violet, and young Dorcas, the mistress he adores, idolizes and kills.

In *Paradise* (1998) Morrison's first novel since winning the Nobel Prize and one of her most ambitious, she explores race and gender in a story, set in 1976 in an all-black town in Oklahoma, that begins with the murder of four women, outsiders by nine men. Traditional paradise, Morrison holds, are 'male enclaves'. The book is truly striking, for it "coalesced around the idea of where paradise is, and who belongs in it."

Morrison's critical works are no less striking than her creative ones. Her essays, first presented at Harvard University, are gathered in the book *Playing in the Dark : Whiteness and Literary Imagination* (1992). She edited and wrote the introduction for *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power : Essays on Anita-Hill, Clarence Thomas and the Construction of Social Realist* (1992). Along with Claudia Brodsky Lacour, she edited *Birth of a Nationhood : Gaze, Script and Spectacle in the O.J. Simpson Case* (1997). It includes an introduction by Morrison.

Black American Literature is prominent and pervasive today, for it has a full life of its own outside the academy. Toni Morrison is clearly not dependent on an academic audience.

2.4.3 As a Black Woman Writer

In the works of Black women writers of America are found intense revelations of the condition of black women in their roles as mother wife and daughter. Pre-marital and extra-marital relationships are depicted. It is women in their social roles that has been explored and exposed by the women writers with energy, anger and insight. Chaudia Tate, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, Maya Angelou Audre Lorde, Ntozake Shange, Toni Cade Bambara, Margaret Walker, Paule Marshall and Toni Morrison all struggle for expression in an idiom peculiarly their own. They had to surmount the all-pervasive mainstream white social and literary culture as well as the literary influences of male Black writers—Richard Wright, James Balduisn, Alex Holy and LeRoi Jones.

Toni Morrison's fictional art is marked by four distinct phases—anger, self-discovery, haloing of the African culture and a crystallization of the ethnic experience with Julius Lester, a black writer, Morrison agrees that as an Afro-American, she is an amalgam. It is her responsibility to reflect the African side of the hyphens for the other (American) side has been too much reflected. Black writers, associated with the Black Arts Movement asserted that their ethnic origin was a matter of pride, not embarrassment. The Black Arts Movement proposed a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic—proposing a separate symbolism, critique mythology and iconology. This distinctness, in fact, forms the basic format of Morrison's novels. She transcends propaganda, racial pride and prejudice and evolves into a narrative out of great excellence and universal dimensions.

Women's literature is attempting to establish a separate ethos and an unique feminine myth as a counterpoint to the existing myth of the male standards. Together, women writers are moving to attain greater aesthetic perfection and a broader perspective on the world. The tragedy of American racism instilled a terrible insecurity and stilted emotions in the Afro-Americans, something that Morrison is intensely concerned about.

Her aesthetic experience of a black culture springs from her association with black life—its music and rhythm, its mystical and mythical contours. Her novels deal with basic issues of black life within a cultural framework. She says in *Black Women Writers at Work* (edited by Claudia Tate) :

When I view the world perceive it and write about it, its the world of black people. I just know that when I'm trying to develop the various themes I write about, the people who best manifest those themes for me are the black people who I invent.

She deliberately avoids or renounces an imposed narrative form. Her writings stand outside the conventional framework and rise out of a situation that demands a perception of black culture.

As William R. Ferris, Chairman U. S. National Endowment for the Humanities commented—

Multicultural literature is a major source of insight into the rich cultural dynamics of our society, a primary medium for Americans to comprehend our nation's rich cultural heritage, and for international audiences to fathom life and thought in the United States. In the stories they tell from different points of view, U.S. authors of a multitude of backgrounds build bridges of understanding over which all of us can cross into each other's worlds Ultimately the power of multicultural literature affects us all, because literature defines the true essence, and soul, of our country.

In the writings of Alice Walker (*The Color Purple*) and Toni Morrison (*The Bluest Eye*) are bondings of certain common features that are horrific and seems to make an empty word of the positive 'multicultural.' Both Celie in *The Color Purple* and Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* were molested by their fathers—sullen men rendered bestial by their addiction to hard drinking. Illiteracy, racialism and poverty seem to crowd in together to create a hellish world where the Black woman, young or old they are perpetually tormented by the twin forces of racism and sexism. The uncertainty of the Black people constantly juxtapose with the aggressiveness, power and influence of the Whites. The social and psychological demeanour laid down by the superior white culture is forcibly thrust on the blacks. As Toni Morrison says :

They were given a cloak of ugliness to wear and they accepted it without question. The master had said, "you are ugly people". "Yes" they had said, "You are right" . And they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it. (*The Bluest Eye*)

Like *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison's creation –*A Genuine Black Book*, most of her novels betray her concern about the cultural devastation and its repercussion on the future of the country. They, like *The Bluest Eye*, often make an effort through the Afro-Americans to exercise what the divided psyche after holds as the evil of blackness.

Throughout her various novels *Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* gaps and spaces are intentionally left for the reader's participation.

2.4.4 Analysis : *Sula*

(i) Introduction

Sula is an account of Eva Peace's matrilinear household. Eva, Hannah Sula—mother, daughter and grand daughter are tied to each other by guilt and a corrupted sense of love, hate and tradition. Morrison exposes this relationship as an idealized and ideological construct. The gulf between mother and daughter is necessitated by patriarchy, so there is 'silence' between them. There is always an 'injury' caused by the mother, that traumatizes the daughter. There is also an echo of the mother's voice, the disciplinarian, as economic helplessness, lack of work and alcohol frustrated a man's capacity of parenthood.

(ii) Structure

Like *Song of Solomon*, *Sula* concerns itself with issues that are basically African-American within a mythical framework. The structure into which the novel is cast is more cyclical than linear, more repetitive than singular and evidently more oral than written. It is not a 'bildungsroman' that traces the life of the protagonist from birth to death. Here, a dominant culture seeks here to circumscribe black experience through the imposition of very negative values. It is strange that in a 20th Century world where the mystic and the imaginative do not belong to living reality, a Black woman writer like Morrison, substitutes a world that thrives on fantasy in reality.

In an interview by Nellie McKay, Morrison had explained : "I think about what black writers do as having a quality of hunger and disturbance that never ends. I want my books to be like that because I want that feeling of something held in reserve and the sense that there is more—that you can't have it all right now."

The search for an identity, a self-assurance establishes a thematic bonding between major black women writers. Paula Marshall's Silla (of *Browngirl, Brownstone*), Alice Walker's Celie (of *Colour Purple*) or Meridian (of *Meridian*) pass on the impulse to define oneself. Their self assurance emanates from within. Morrison, too, never judges her characters. Their horrific parts, bitter experiences and sordid deeds are always put in context to the conditioning that their harsh lives had afforded them.

(iii) Character

The focus of Morrison's study in most of her novels is the repeatedly marginalized girl child. The recurrence of this girl-child points to an organization in Morrison own psyche and examines an archetypally feminine growing up process. In its fulfilled form the process often appears symbolical for the assertion of the child against the effacement of personality demanded by an adult. Stretched further, it becomes a metaphor for the process of maturation of feminine art in a milieu of alien, dominant ideologies.

It is the girl-child, in her moment of psychic and sexual awakening, that Morrison highlights. Sula, like her images in the other intense novels, are even traumatized and abused. She is pubescent, half woman, half child—and she is a little of all these others—Pecola, Claudia, Dorcas Felice, Denver, Nel and Beloved. Rebellious and sensitive, she finds herself burdened with a family, children and responsibilities. As a Black, a female and a child, Sula realises that utter powerlessness is her inheritance. Inbuilt into her is a fear of autonomous action—that for her, things can never go right. Subordination is demanded by her mother, as in other novels of Morrison, and Sula refuses. In her world of matrilinearity, the father is a nebulous presence. This implies a rejection of an apotheosis of marriage, motherhood and domestic servitude. She is rebellious, and demands, like Beloved, nothing less than a resurrection or a willed rebirth. Hers is not a passive resistance to victimization or betrayal, and she, in her own capacity, poses a challenge to mainstream racial and patriarchal values. As Sula transgresses many boundaries, she displays a stubborn acceptance of a lack of relatedness with family or immediate society. Her experience engender endurance, tremendous stamina, courage and an ironical wit in her. Against conventional bounds of normalcy and reality, Sula's hysteria, eccentricity and immorality is a common factor we find in other Morrison heroines—poor, degraded, evil-dogged girls.

Sula and her friend Nel are 'solitary little girls of profound loneliness.' They are excited by a mean determination to explore everything that interested them and 'they had no priorities.' Both are 'unshaped, formless things.' She is insecure in her relationship with her mother for she was a daughter with a distant mother and incomprehensible father. Sula's confidence that her mother loved her was shattered when she overheard her maveric say – "I love Sula. I just don't like her. That's the difference." The shock released Sula from any allegiance towards her mother and makes her a maveric. Like her mother, Sula becomes another vicious adult and apathetic mother, ironically completing a pattern that her grandmother Eva had begun. Sula even watches

interestedly as her mother burns. Sula runs away from home and returns ten years later—an emotionless and amoral adult. She fosters her own terrible estrangement as a condition of her rebirth. “I want to make myself.” An accidental murder she committed the same day she overheard her mother's hurtful comment fosters a corruptive egoism in her. She would survive but “she had no centre, no speak around which to grow.”

Like Pecola or Beloved, Sula manufactures herself from this lack of being. When she talks of the ‘free fall’, the ‘full surrender to the downward flight’ perhaps at the back of her mind she thinks of her victim, chicken little, whom she had carelessly tossed into deep waters to be drowned in a childish, mindless act of annihilation.

(iv) Images

Images recur with an intensity that drive home certain truths. Two major images recur in *Sula*—*fire* and the *circle*.

Eva, the grandmother had set fire to her own son Plum, as she detested his habit of addiction. Yet when her daughter Hannah is on fire and Sula watches dispassionately, Eva jumps out of a first floor window to save her.

The circle returns with various undertones throughout *Sula*. Sula swings chicken little in circles before letting him fly into the waters to drown, leaving circular ripples in the river—Hannah, before dying, makes circles in her cooking water. Nel laments and her cry is envisaged: “It had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow.”

It seems that a circular motion draws the outcast black folk into the mainstream of life, making affirmations of their cultural identity. Moral good or evil refuse to be antithetical poles of morality, as the conditions of life draw everything into a vortex, so that the distinct edges are blurred.

(v) Female Bonding

Morrison's *Sula* resonates with repetitive incidents that acquire symbolic undertones. She had explored male friendship in *Song of Solomon*, and in *Sula* Morrison reveals an intense feminine friendship that does not disintegrate into lesbianism. She values, unlike many of her contemporaries, friendship at the emotional and spiritual plane. Sula is both a foil and countefoil to Nel Wright her childhood companion. As long as Sula stays within the traditions of the black folks, she is tolerated. But when she returns after many years to

lead a life of sexual freedom, people abhor her. She is considered 'evil' and even Nel shuns her. Sula sets up a challenging pattern rather than defensive strategies. She rejects traditional ordering principles as they relate to self and society. Sula is a leitmotif of her grandmother Eva, even towards the end, when she barricades herself in a room upstairs and totally withdraws from society. Eva had found a defense in hate, but Sula challenges reality and is disillusioned, but undefeated. Morrison is critical towards Sula's 'me-ness'. Since her search was perverted, she dies unfulfilled. For Morrison, the wholeness of life lies in sharing and loving, not in isolation or meanness.

2.4.6 □ Questions

1. Consider Toni Morrison as an iconoclastic black woman novelist.
 2. Comment on the portrayal of women in Morrisons' novel *Sula*.
 3. Does Morrison succeed in depicting women who are deviant from social norms by delving into their complex mental fabric? Give a detailed answers, with examples from the novel *Sula*.
 4. Comment on the bonding of Nel and Sula.
 5. How far does Morrison succeed in giving an intense insight into the world of the child? Is it juxtaposed with the adult world?
 6. Morrison reveals dimensions to a world that few black writers even explored. Do you agree?
 7. Consider Morrison as an innovation blender of occasion and character in her novel *Sula*.
 8. Write a note on the character and tragedy of Chicken Little.
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2.4.7 □ Select Bibliography

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Unit 2.5 □ “Good Country People” : Flannery O’ Connor

Structure

2.5.0 Text : "Good Country People"

2.5.1 Introduction

2.5.2 “Good Country People” : An Analysis

2.5.3 Narrative Technique

2.5.4 Women Characters

2.5.5 Conclusion

2.5.0 □ Text : “Good Country People”

Besides the neutral expression that she wore when she was alone, Mrs. Freeman had two others, forward and reverse, that she used for all her human dealings. Her forward expression was steady and driving like the advance of a heavy truck. Her eyes never swerved to left or right but turned as the story turned as if they followed a yellow line down the center of it. She seldom used the other expression because it was not often necessary for her to retract a statement, but when she did, her face came to a complete stop, there was an almost imperceptible movement of her black eyes, during which they seemed to be receding, and then the observer would see that Mrs. Freeman, though she might stand there as real as several grain sacks thrown on top of each other, was no longer there in spirit. As for getting anything across to her when this was the case, Mrs. Hopewell had given it up. She might talk her head off. Mrs. Freeman could never be brought to admit herself wrong on any point. She would stand there and if she could be brought to say anything, it was something like, " Well, I wouldn't of said it was and I wouldn't of said it wasn't," or letting her range over the top kitchen shelf where there was an assortment of dusty bottles, she might remark, "I see you ain't ate many of them figs you put up last summer."

They carried on their most important business in the kitchen at breakfast. Every morning Mrs. Hopewell got up at seven o'clock and lit her gas heater and loy's. Joy was her daughter, a large blonde girl who had an artificial leg.

Mrs. Hopewell thought of her as a child though she was thirty-two years old and highly educated. Joy would get up while her mother was eating and lumber into the bathroom and slam the door, and before long, Mrs. Freeman would arrive at the back door. Joy would hear her mother call, "Come on in," and then they would talk for a while in low voices that were indistinguishable in the bathroom. By the time Joy came in, they had usually finished the weather report and were on one or the other of Mrs. Freeman's daughters, Glynese or Carramae. Joy called them Glycerin and Caramel. Glynese, a redhead, was eighteen and had many admirers; Carramae, a blonde, was only fifteen but already married and pregnant. She could not keep anything on her stomach. Every morning Mrs. Freeman told Mrs. Hopewell how many times she had vomited since the last report.

Mrs. Hopewell liked to tell people that Glynese and Carramae were two of the finest girls she knew and that Mrs. Freeman was a *lady* and that she was never ashamed to take her anywhere or introduce her to anybody they might meet. Then she would tell how she had happened to hire the Freemans in the first place and how they were a godsend to her and how she had had them four years. The reason for her keeping them so long was that they were not trash. They were good country people. She had telephoned the man whose name they had given as a reference and he had told her that Mr. Freeman was a good farmer but that his wife was the nosiest woman ever to walk the earth. "She's got to be into everything," the man said. "If she don't get there before the dust settles, you can bet she's dead, that's all. She'll want to know all your business. I can stand him real good," he had said, "but me nor my wife neither could have stood that woman one more minute on this place." That had put Mrs. Hopewell off for a few days.

She had hired them in the end because there were no other applicants but she had made up her mind beforehand exactly how she would handle the woman. Since she was the type who had to be into everything, then, Mrs. Hopewell had decided, she would not only let her be into everything, she would see to it that she was into everything—she would give her the responsibility of everything, she would put her in charge. Mrs. Hopewell had no bad qualities of her own but she was able to use other people's in such a constructive way that she never felt the lack. She had hired the Freemans and she had kept them four years.

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

usually at the table, in a tone of gentle insistence as if no one held them but her, and the large hulking Joy, whose constant outrage had obliterated every expression from her face, would stare just a little to the side of her, her eyes icy blue, with the look of someone who has achieved blindness by an act of will and means to keep it.

When Mrs. Hopewell said to Mrs. Freeman that life was like that, Mrs. Freeman would say, "I always said so myself." Nothing had been arrived at by anyone that had not first been arrived at by her. She was quicker than Mr. Freeman. When Mrs. Hopewell said to her after they had been on the place a while, "You know, you're the wheel behind the wheel," and winked, Mrs. Freeman had said, "I know it, I've always been quick. It's some that are quicker than others."

"Everybody is different," Mrs. Hopewell said.

"Yes, most people is," Mrs. Freeman said.

"It takes all kinds to make the world."

"I always said it did myself."

The girl was used to this kind of dialogue for breakfast and more of it for dinner; sometimes they had it for supper too. When they had no guest they ate in the kitchen because that was easier. Mrs. Freeman always managed to arrive at some point during the meal and to watch them finish it. She would stand in the doorway if it were summer but in the winter she would stand with one elbow on top of the refrigerator and look down on them, or she would stand by the gas heater, lifting the back of her skirt slightly. Occasionally she would stand against the wall and roll her head from side to side. At no time was she in any hurry to leave. All this was very trying on Mrs. Hopewell but she was a woman of great patience. She realized that nothing is perfect and that in the Freemans she had good country people and that if, in this day and age, you get good country people, you had better hang onto them.

She had had plenty of experience with trash. Before the Freemans she had averaged one tenant family a year. The wives of these farmers were not the kind you would want to be around you for very long. Mrs. Hopewell, who had divorced her husband long ago, needed someone to walk over the fields with her; and when joy had to be impressed for these services, her remarks were usually so ugly and her face so glum that Mrs. Hopewell would say, "If you can't come pleasantly, I don't want you at all," to which the girl, standing square and rigid-shouldered with her neck thrust slightly forward, would reply, "If you want me, here I am—LIKE I AM."

Mrs. Hopewell excused this attitude because of the leg (which had been shot off in a hunting accident when Joy was ten). It was hard for Mrs. Hopewell to realize that her child was thirty-two now and that for more than twenty years she had had only one leg. She thought of her still as a child because it tore her heart to think instead of the poor stout girl in her thirties who had never danced a step or had any *normal* good times. Her name was really Joy but as soon as she was twenty-one and away from home, she had had it legally changed. Mrs. Hopewell was certain that she had thought and thought until she had hit upon the ugliest name in any language. Then she had gone and had the beautiful name, Joy, changed without telling her mother until after she had done it. Her legal name was Hulga.

When Mrs. Hopewell thought the name, Hulga, she thought of the broad blank hull of a battleship. She would not use it. She continued to call her Joy to which the girl responded but in a purely mechanical way.

Hulga had learned to tolerate Mrs. Freeman who saved her from taking walks with her mother. Even Glynese and Carramae were useful when they occupied attention that might otherwise have been directed at her. At first she had thought she could not stand Mrs. Freeman for she had found that it was not possible to be rude to her. Mrs. Freeman would take on strange resentments and for days together she would be sullen but the source of her displeasure was always obscure; a direct attack, a positive leer, blatant ugliness to her face—these never touched her. And without warning one day, she began calling her Hulga.

She did not call her that in front of Mrs. Hopewell who would have been incensed but when she and the girl happened to be out of the house together, she would say something and add the name Hulga to the end of it, and the big spectacled Joy-Hulga would scowl and redden as if her privacy had been intruded upon. She considered the name her personal affair. She had arrived at it first purely on the basis of its ugly sound and then the full genius of its fitness had struck her. She had a vision of the name working like the ugly sweating Vulcan¹ who stayed in the furnace and to whom, presumably, the goddess had to come when called. She saw it as the name of her highest creative act. One of her major triumphs was that her mother had not been able to turn her dust into Joy, but the greater one was that she had been able to turn it herself into Hulga. However, Mrs. Freeman's relish for using the name only irritated her. It was as if Mrs. Freeman's beady steel-

1. In Roman mythology, the lame blacksmith to the gods and husband of Venus, goddess of love.

pointed eyes had penetrated far enough behind her face to reach some secret fact. Something about her seemed to fascinate Mrs. Freeman and then one day Hulga realized that it was the artificial leg. Mrs. Freeman had a special fondness for the details of secret infections, hidden deformities, assaults upon children. Of diseases, she preferred the lingering or incurable. Hulga had heard Mrs. Hopewell give her the details of the hunting accident, how the leg had been literally blasted off, how she had never lost consciousness. Mrs. Freeman could listen to it any time as if it had happened an hour ago.

When Hulga stumped into the kitchen in the morning (she could walk without making the awful noise but she made it—Mrs. Hopewell was certain—because it was ugly-sounding), she glanced at them and did not speak. Mrs. Hopewell would be in her red kimono with her hair tied around her head in rags. She would be sitting at the table, finishing her breakfast and Mrs. Freeman would be hanging by her elbow outward from the refrigerator, looking down at the table. Hulga always put her eggs on the stove to boil and then stood over them with her arms folded, and Mrs. Hopewell would look at her—a kind of indirect gaze divided between her and Mrs. Freeman—and would think that if she would only keep herself up a little, she wouldn't be so bad looking. There was nothing wrong with her face that a pleasant expression wouldn't help. Mrs. hopewell said people who looked on the bright side of things would be beautiful even if they were not.

Whenever she looked at Joy this way, she could not help but feel that it would have been better if the child had not taken the Ph.D. It had certainly not brought her out any and now that she had it, there was no more excuse for her to go school again. Mrs. Hopewell thought it was nice for girls to go to school to have a good time but Joy had “gone through.” Anyhow, she would not have been strong enough to go again. The doctors had told Mrs. Hopewell that with the best of care, Joy might see forty-five. She had a weak heart. Joy had made it plain that if it had not been for this condition, she would be far from these red hills and good country people. She would be in a university lecturing to people who knew what she was talking about. And Mrs. Hopewell could very well picture her there, looking like a scarecrow and lecturing to more of the same. Here she went about all day in a six-year-old skirt and a yellow sweat shirt with a faded cowboy on a horse embossed on it. She thought this was funny; Mrs. Hopewell thought it was idiotic and showed simply that she was still a child. She was brilliant but she didn't have a grain of sense. It seemed to Mrs. Hopewell that every year she grew less like other people and more like herself—bloated, rude and squint-eyed.

And she said such strange things! To her own mother she had said—without warning, without excuse, standing up in the middle of a meal with her face purple and her mouth half full—“Woman! do you ever look inside? Do you ever look inside and see what you are *not*? God!” she had cried sinking down again and staring at her plate, “Malebranche was right: we are not our own light. We are not our own light!” Mrs. Hopewell had no idea to this day what brought that on. She had only made the remark, hoping Joy would take it in, that a smile never hurt anyone.

The girl had taken the Ph.D. in philosophy and this left Mrs. Hopewell at a complete loss. You could say, “My daughter is a nurse,” or “My daughter is a school teacher,” or even, “My daughter is a chemical engineer.” You could not say, “My daughter is a philosopher.” That was something, that had ended with the Greeks and Romans. All day Joy sat on her neck in a deep chair, reading. Sometimes she went for walks but she didn’t like dogs or cats or birds or flowers or nature or nice young men. She looked at nice young men as if she could smell their stupidity.

One day Mrs. Hopewell had picked up one of the books the girl had just-put down and opening it at random, she read, “Science, on the other hand, has to assert its soberness and seriousness afresh and declare that it is concerned solely with what-is. Nothing—how can it be for science anything but a horror and a phantasm? If science is right, then one thing stands firm: science wishes to know nothing of nothing. Such is after all the strictly scientific approach to Nothing. We know it by wishing to know nothing of Nothing.” These words had been underlined with a blue pencil and they worked on Mrs. Hopewell like some evil incantation in gibberish. She shut the book quickly and went out of the room as if she were having a chill.

This morning when the girl came in, Mrs. Freeman was on Carramae. “She thrown up four times after supper,” she said, “and was up twict in the night after three o’clock. Yesterday she didn’t do nothing but ramble in the bureau drawer. All she did. Stand up there and see what she could run up on.”

“She’s got to eat,” Mrs. Hopewell muttered, sipping her coffee, while she watched Joy’s back at the stove. She was wondering what the child had said to the Bible salesman. She could not imagine what kind of a conversation she could possibly have had with him.

He was a tall gaunt hatless youth who had called yesterday to sell them a Bible. He had appeared at the door, carrying a large black suitcase that weighted him so heavily on one side that he had to brace himself against the

door facing. He seemed on the point of collapse but he said in a cheerful voice, "Good morning, Mrs. Cedars!" and set the suitcase down on the mat. He was not a bad-looking young man though he had on a bright blue suit and yellow socks that were not pulled up far enough. He had prominent face bones and a streak of sticky-looking brown hair falling across his forehead.

"I'm Mrs. Hopewell," she said.

"Oh!" he said, pretending to look puzzled but with his eyes sparkling, "I saw it said 'The Cedars,' on the mailbox so I thought you was Mrs. Cedars!" and he burst out in a pleasant laugh. He picked up the satchel and under cover of a pant, he fell forward into her hall. It was rather as if the suitcase had moved first, jerking him after it. "Mrs. Hopewell!" he said and grabbed her hand. "I hope you are well!" and he laughed again and then all at once his face sobered completely. He paused and gave her a straight earnest look and said, "Lady, I've come to speak of serious things."

"Well, come in," she muttered, none too pleased because her dinner was almost ready. He came into the parlor and sat down on the edge of a straight chair and put the suitcase between his feet and glanced around the room as if he were sizing her up by it. Her silver gleamed on the two sideboards; she decided he had never been in a room as elegant as this.

"Mrs. Hopewell," he began, using her name in a way that sounded almost intimate, "I know you believe in Chrastian service."

"Well yes," she murmured.

"I know," he said and paused, looking very wise with his head cocked on one side, "that you're a good woman. Friends have told me."

Mrs. Hopewell never liked to be taken for a fool. "What are you selling?" she asked.

"Bibles," the young man said and his eye raced around the room before he added, "I see you have no family Bible in your parlor, I see that is the one lack you got!"

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

"Lady," he said, "the word of God ought to be in the parlor."

"Well, I think that's a matter of taste," she began. "I think . . ."

"Lady," he said, "for a Chrastian, the word of God ought to be in every room in the house besides in his heart. I know you're a Chrastian because I can see it in every line of your face."

She stood up and said, "Well, young man, I don't want to buy a Bible and I smell my dinner burning."

He didn't get up. He began to twist his hands and looking down at them, he said softly, "Well lady, I'll tell you the truth—not many people want to buy one nowadays and besides, I know I'm real simple. I don't know how to say a thing but to say it. I'm just a country boy." He glanced up into her unfriendly face. "People like you don't like to fool with country people like me!"

"Why!" she cried, "good country people are the salt of the earth! Besides, we all have different ways of doing, it takes all kinds to make the world go 'round. That's life!"

"You said a mouthful," he said.

"Why, I think there aren't enough good country people in the world!" she said, stirred. "I think that's what's wrong with it!"

His face had brightened. "I didn't introduce myself," he said. "I'm Manley pointer from out in the country around Willohobie, not even from a place, just from near a place."

"You wait a minute," she said. "I have to see about my dinner." She went out to the kitchen and found Joy standing near the door where she had been listening.

"Get rid of the salt of the earth," she said, "and let's eat."

Mrs. Hopewell gave her a pained look and turned the heat down under the vegetables. "I can't be rude to anybody," she murmured and went back into the parlor.

He had opened the suitcase and was sitting with a Bible on each knee.

"You might as well put those up," she told him. "I don't want one."

"I appreciate your honesty," he said. "You don't see any more real honest people unless you go way out in the country."

"I know," she said, "real genuine folks!" Through the crack in the door she heard a groan.

"I guess a lot of boys come telling you they're working their way through college," he said, "but I'm not going to tell you that. Somehow," he said, "I don't want to go to college. I want to devote my life to Christian service. See," he said, lowering his voice, "I got this heart condition. I may not live long. When you know it's something wrong with you and you may not live long, well then, lady . . ." He paused, with his mouth open, and stared at her.

He and Joy had the same condition! She knew that her eyes were filling with tears but she collected herself quickly and murmured, "Won't you stay for dinner? We'd love to have you!" and was sorry the instant she heard herself say it.

“Yes mam,” he said in an abashed voice, “I would sher love to do that!”

Joy had given him one look on being introduced to him and then throughout the meal had not glanced at him again. He had addressed several remarks to her, which she had pretended not to hear. Mrs. Hopewell could not understand deliberate rudeness, although she lived with it, and she felt she had always to overflow with hospitality to make up for Joy’s lack of courtesy. She urged him to talk about himself and he did. He said he was the seventh child of twelve and that his father had been crushed under a tree when he himself was eight year old. He had been crushed very badly, in fact, almost cut in two and was practically not recognizable. His mother had got along the best she could by hard working and she had always seen that her children went to Sunday School and that they read the Bible every evening. He was now nineteen year old and he had been selling Bibles for four months. In that time he had sold seventy-seven Bibles and had the promise of two more sales. He wanted to become a missionary because he thought that was the way you could do most for people. “He who locest his life shall find it,” he said simply and he was so sincere, so genuine and earnest that Mrs. Hopewell would not for the world have smiled. He prevented his peas from sliding onto the table by blocking them with a piece of bread which he later cleaned his plate with. She could see Joy observing sidewise how he handled his knife and fork and she saw too that every few minutes, the boy would dart a keen appraising glance at the girl as if he were trying to attract her attention.

After dinner Joy cleared the dishes off the table and disappeared and Mrs. Hopewell was left to talk with him. He told her again about his childhood and his father’s accident and about various things that had happened to him. Every five minutes or so she would stifle a yawn. He sat for two hours until finally she told him she must go because she had an appointment in town. He packed his Bibles and thanked her and prepared to leave, but in the doorway he stopped and wrung her hand and said that not on any of his trips had he met a lady as nice as her and he asked if he could come again. She had said she would always be happy to see him.

Joy had been standing in the road, apparently looking at something in the distance, when he came down the steps toward her, bent to the side with his heavy valise. He stopped where she was standing and confronted her directly. Mrs. Hopewell could not hear what he said but she trembled to think what Joy would say to him. She could see that after a minute Joy said something and that then the boy began to speak again, making an excited

gesture with his free hand. After a minute Joy said something else at which the boy began to speak once more. Then to her amazement, Mrs. Hopewell saw the two of them walk off together, toward the gate. Joy had walked all the way to the gate with him and Mrs. Hopewell could not imagine what they had said to each other, and she had not yet dared to ask.

Mrs. Freeman was insisting upon her attention. She had moved from the refrigerator to the heater so that Mrs. Hopewell had to turn and face her in order to seem to be listening. "Glynese gone out with Harvey Hill again last night," she said. "She had this sty."

"Hill," Mrs. Hopewell said absently, "is that the one who works in the garage?"

"Nome, he's the one that goes to chiropracter school," Mrs. Freeman said. "She had this sty. Been had it two days. So she says when he brought her in the other night he says, 'Lemme get rid of that sty for you,' and she says, 'How?' and he says, 'You just lay yourself down across the seat of that car and I'll show you.' So she done it and he popped her neck. Kept on a-popping it several times until she made him quit. This morning," Mrs. Freeman said, "she ain't got no sty. She ain't got no traces of a sty."

"I never heard of that before," Mrs. Hopewell said.

"He ask her to marry him before the Ordinary," Mrs. Freeman went on, "and she told him she wasn't going to be married in no *office*."

"Well, Glynese is a fine girl," Mrs. Hopewell said. "Glynese and Carramae are both fine girls."

"Carramae said when her and Lyman was married Lyman said it sure felt sacred to him. She said he said he wouldn't take five hundred dollars for being married by a preacher."

"How much would he take?" the girl asked from the stove.

"He said he wouldn't take five hundred dollars," Mrs. Freeman repeated.

"Well we all have work to do," Mrs. Hopewell said.

"Lyman said it just felt more sacred to him," Mrs. Freeman said. "The doctor wants Carramae to eat prunes. Says instead of medicine. Says them cramps is coming from pressure. You know where I think it is?"

"She'll be better in a few weeks," Mrs. Hopewell said.

"In the tube," Mrs. Freeman said. "Else she wouldn't be as sick as she is."

Hulga had cracked her two eggs into a saucer and was bringing them to the table along with a cup of coffee that she had filled too full. She sat down carefully and began to eat, meaning to keep Mrs. Freeman there by

questions if for any reason she showed an inclination to leave. She could perceive her mother's eye on her. The first round-about question would be about the Bible salesman and she did not wish to bring it on. "How did he pop her neck?" She asked.

Mrs. Freeman went into a description of how he had popped her neck. She said he owned a '55 Mercury but that Glynese said she would rather marry a man with only a '36 Plymouth who would be married by a preacher. The girl asked what if he had a '32 Plymouth and Mrs. Freeman said what Glynese had said was a '36 Plymouth.

Mrs. Hopewell said there were not many girls with Glynese's common sense. She said what she admired in those girls was their common sense. She said that reminded her that they had a nice visitor yesterday, a young man selling Bibles. "Lord," she said, "he bored me to death but he was so sincere and genuine I couldn't be rude to him. He was just good country people, you know," she said, "—just the salt of the earth."

"I seen him walk up," Mrs. Freeman said, "and then later—I seen him walk off," and Hulga could feel the slight shift in her voice, the slight insinuation, that he had not walked off alone, had he? Her face remained expressionless but the color rose into her neck and she seemed to swallow it down with the next spoonful of egg. Mrs. Freeman was looking at her as if they had a secret together.

"Well, it takes all kinds of people to make the world go 'round," Mrs. Hopewell said. "It's very good we aren't all alike."

"Some people are more alike than other," Mrs. Freeman said.

Hulga got up and stumped, with about twice the noise that was necessary, into her room and locked the door. She was to meet the Bible salesman at ten o'clock at the gate. She had thought about it half the night. She had started thinking of it as a great joke and then she had begun to see profound implications in it. She had lain in bed imagining dialogues for them that were insane on the surface but that reached below to depths that no Bible salesman would be aware of. Their conversation yesterday had been of this kind.

He had stopped in front of her and had simply stood there. His face was bony and sweaty and bright, with a little pointed nose in the center of it, and his look was different from what it had been at the dinner table. He was gazing at her with open curiosity, with fascination, like a child watching a new fantastic animal at the zoo, and he was breathing as if he had run a great distance to reach her. His gaze seemed somehow familiar but she

could not think where she had been regarded with it before. For almost a minute he didn't say anything. Then on what seemed an insuck of breath, he whispered, "You ever ate a chicken that was two days old?"

The girl looked at him stonily. He might have just put this question up for consideration at the meeting of a philosophical association. "Yes," she presently replied as if she had considered it from all angles.

"It must have been mighty small!" he said triumphantly and shook all over with little nervous giggles, getting very red in the face, and subsiding finally into his gaze of complete admiration, while the girl's expression remained exactly the same.

"How old are you?" he asked softly.

She waited some time before she answered. Then in a flat voice she said, "Seventeen."

His smiles came in succession like waves breaking on the surface of a little lake. "I see you got a wooden leg," he said. "I think you're real brave. I think you're real sweet."

The girl stood blank and solid and silent.

"Walk to the gate with me," he said. "You're a brave sweet little thing and I liked you the minute I seen you walk in the door."

Hulga began to move forward.

"What's your name?" he asked, smiling down on the top of her head.

"Hulga," she said.

"Hulga," he murmured, "Hulga. Hulga. I never heard of anybody name Hulga before. You're shy, aren't you, Hulga?" he asked.

She nodded, watching his large red hand on the handle of the giant valise.

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

"I may die too," she said suddenly and looked up at him. His eyes were very small and brown, glittering feverishly.

"Listen," he said, "don't you think some people was meant to meet on account of what all they got in common and all? Like they both think serious thoughts and all?" He shifted the valise to his other hand so that the hand nearest her was free. He caught hold of her elbow and shook it a little. "I don't work on Saturday," he said. "I like to walk in the woods and see what Mother Nature is wearing. O'er the hills and far away. Pic-nics and things. Couldn't we go on a picnic tomorrow? Say yes, Hulga," he said and gave her

a dying look as if he felt his insides about to drop out of him. He had even seemed to sway slightly toward her.

During the night she had imagined that she seduced him. She imagined that the two of them walked on the place until they came to the storage barn beyond the two back fields and there, she imagined, that things came to such a pass that she very easily seduced him and that then, of course, she had to reckon with his remorse. True genius can get an idea across even to an inferior mind. She imagined that she took his remorse in hand and changed it into a deeper understanding of life. She took all his shame away and turned it into something useful.

She set off for the gate at exactly ten o'clock, escaping without drawing Mrs. Hopewell's attention. She didn't take anything to eat, forgetting that food is usually taken on a picnic. She wore a pair of slacks and a dirty white shirt, and as an after-thought, she had put some Vapex on the collar of it since she did not own any perfume. When she reached the gate no one was there.

She looked up and down the empty highway and had the furious feeling that she had been tricked, that he had only meant to make her walk to the gate after the idea of him. Then suddenly he stood up, very tall, from behind a bush on the opposite embankment. Smiling, he lifted his hat which was new and wide-brimmed. He had not worn it yesterday and she wondered if he had bought it for the occasion. It was toast-colored with a red and white band around it and was slightly too large for him. He stepped from behind the bush still carrying the black valise. He had on the same suit and the same yellow socks sucked down in his shoes from walking. He crossed the highway and said, "I knew you'd come!"

The girl wondered acidly how he had known this. She pointed to the valise and asked, "Why did you bring your Bibles?"

He took her elbow, smiling down on her as if he could not stop. "You can never tell when you'll need the word of God, Hulga," he said. She had a moment in which she doubted that this was actually happening and then they began to climb the embankment. They went down into the pasture toward the woods. The boy walked lightly by her side, bouncing on his toes. The valise did not seem to be heavy today; he even swung it. They crossed half the pasture without saying anything and then, putting his hand easily on the small of her back, he asked softly, "Where does your wooden leg join on?"

She turned an ugly red and glared at him and for an instant the boy

looked abashed. "I didn't mean you no harm," he said. "I only meant you're so brave and all. I guess God takes care of you."

"No," she said, looking forward and walking fast, "I don't even believe in God."

At this he stopped and whistled. "No!" he exclaimed as if he were too astonished to say anything else.

She walked on and in a second he was bouncing at her side, fanning with his hat. "That's very unusual for a girl," he remarked, watching her out of the corner of his eye. When they reached the edge of the wood, he put his hand on her back again and drew her against him without a word and kissed her heavily.

The kiss, which had more pressure than feeling behind it, produced that extra surge of adrenalin in the girl that enables one to carry a packed trunk out of a burning house, but in her, the power went at once to the brain. Even before he released her, her mind, clear and detached and ironic anyway, was regarding him from a great distance, with amusement but with pity. She had never been kissed before and she was pleased to discover that it was an unexceptional experience and all a matter of the mind's control. Some people might enjoy drain water if they were told it was vodka. When the boy, looking expectant but uncertain, pushed her gently away, she turned and walked on, saying nothing as if such business, for her, were common enough.

He came along panting at her side, trying to help her when he saw a root that she might trip over. He caught and held back the long swaying blades of thorn vine until she had passed beyond them. She led the way and he came breathing heavily behind her. Then they came out on a sunlit hillside, sloping softly into another one a little smaller. Beyond, they could see the rusted top of the old barn where the extra hay was stored.

The hill was sprinkled with small pink weeds. "Then you ain't saved?" he asked suddenly, stopping.

The girl smiled. It was the first time she had smiled at him at all. "In my economy," she said, "I'm saved and you are damned but I told you I didn't believe in God."

Nothing seemed to destroy the boy's look of admiration. He gazed at her now as if the fantastic animal at the zoo had put its paw through the bars and given him a loving poke. She thought he looked as if he wanted to kiss her again and she walked on before he had the chance.

"Ain't there somewheres we can sit down sometime?" he murmured, his voice softening toward the end of the sentence.

"In that barn," she said.

They made for it rapidly as if it might slide away like a train. It was a large two-story barn, cool and dark inside. The boy pointed up the ladder that led into the loft and said, "It's too bad we can't go up there."

"Why can't we?" she asked.

"Yer leg," he said reverently.

The girl gave him a contemptuous look and putting both hands on the ladder, she climbed it while he stood below, apparently awestruck. She pulled herself expertly through the opening and then looked down at him and said, "Well, come on if you're coming," and he began to climb the ladder, awkwardly bringing the suitcase with him.

"We won't need the Bible," she observed.

"You never can tell," he said, panting. After he had got into the loft, he was a few seconds catching his breath. She had sat down in a pile of straw. A wide sheath of sunlight, filled with dust particles, slanted over her. She lay back against a bale, her face turned away, looking out the front opening of the barn where hay was thrown from a wagon into the loft. The two pink-speckled hillsides lay back against a dark ridge of woods. The sky was cloudless and cold blue. The boy dropped down by her side and put one arm under her and the other over her and began methodically kissing her face, making little noises like a fish. He did not remove his hat but it was pushed far enough back not to interfere. When her glasses got in his way, he took them off of her and slipped them into his pocket.

The girl at first did not return any of the kisses but presently she began to and after she had put several on his cheek, she reached his lips and remained there, kissing him again and again as if she were trying to draw all the breath out of him. His breath was clear and sweet like a child's and the kisses were sticky like a child's. He mumbled about loving her and about knowing when he first seen her that he loved her, but the mumbling was like the sleepy fretting of a child being put to sleep by his mother. Her mind, throughout this, never stopped or lost itself for a second to her feelings. "You ain't said you loved me none," he whispered finally, pulling back from her. "You got to say that."

She looked away from him off into the hollow sky and then down at a black ridge and then down farther into what appeared to be two green swelling lakes. She didn't realize he had taken her glasses but this landscape could not seem exceptional to her for she seldom paid any close attention to her surroundings.

"You got to say it," he repeated. "You got to say you love me."

She was always careful how she committed herself. "In a sense," she began, "if you use the word loosely, you might say that. But it's not a word I use. I don't have illusions. I'm one of those people who see *through* to nothing."

The boy was frowning. "You got to say it. I said it and you got to say it," he said.

The girl looked at him almost tenderly. "You poor baby," she murmured. "It's just as well you don't understand," and she pulled him by the neck, facedown, against her. "We are all damned," she said, "but some of us have taken off our blindfolds and see that there's nothing to see. It's a kind of salvation."

The boy's astonished eyes looked blankly through the ends of her hair. "Okay," he almost whined, "but do you love me or don'tcher?"

"Yes," she said and added, "in a sense. But I must tell you something. There mustn't be anything dishonest between us." She lifted his head and looked him in the eye. "I am thirty years old," she said. "I have a number of degrees."

The boy's look was irritated but dogged. "I don't care," he said. "I don't care a thing about what all you done. I just want to know if you love me or don'tcher?" and he caught her to him and wildly planted her face with kisses until she said, "Yes, yes."

"Okay then," he said, letting her go. "Prove it."

She smiled, looking dreamily out on the shifty landscape. She had seduced him without even making up her mind to try. "How?" she asked, feeling that he should be delayed a little.

He leaned over and put his lips to her ear. "Show me where your wooden leg joins on," he whispered.

The girl uttered a sharp little cry and her face instantly drained of color. The obscenity of the suggestion was not what shocked her. As a child she had sometimes been subject to feelings of shame but education had removed the last traces of that as a good surgeon scrapes for cancer; she would no more have felt it over what he was asking than she would have believed in his Bible. But she was as sensitive about the artificial leg as a peacock about his tail. No one ever touched it but her. She took care of it as someone else would his soul, in private and almost with her own eyes turned away. "No," she said.

"I known it," he muttered, sitting up. "You're just playing me for a sucker."

“Oh no no!” she cried. “It joins on at the knee. Only at the knee. Why do you want to see it?”

The boy gave her a long penetrating look. “Because,” he said, “it’s what makes you different. You ain’t like anybody else.”

She sat staring at him. There was nothing about her face or her round freezing-blue eyes to indicate that this had moved her; but she felt as if her heart had stopped and left her mind to pump her blood. She decided that for the first time in her life she was face to face with real innocence. This boy, with an instinct that came from beyond wisdom, had touched the truth about her. When after a minute, she said in a hoarse high voice, “All right,” it was like surrendering to him completely. It was like losing her own life and finding it again, miraculously, in his.

Very gently he began to roll the slack leg up. The artificial limb, in a white sock and brown flat shoe, was bound in a heavy material like canvas and ended in an ugly jointure where it was attached to the stump. The boy’s face and his voice were entirely reverent as he uncovered it and said, “Now show me how to take it off and on.”

She took it off for him and put it back on again and then he took it off himself, handling it as tenderly as if it were a real one. “See!” he said with a delighted child’s face. “Now I can do it myself!”

“Put it back on,” she said. She was thinking that she would run away with him and that every night he would take the leg off and every morning put it back on again. “Put it back on,” she said.

“Not yet,” he murmured, setting it on its foot out of her reach. “Leave it off for a while. You got me instead.”

She gave a little cry of alarm but he pushed her down and began to kiss her again. Without the leg she felt entirely dependent on him. Her brain seemed to have stopped thinking altogether and to be about some other function that it was not very good at. Different expressions raced back and forth over her face. Every now and then the boy, his eyes like two steel spikes, would glance behind him where the leg stood. Finally she pushed him off and said, “Put it back on me now.”

“Wait,” he said. He leaned the other way and pulled the valise toward him and opened it. It had a pale blue spotted lining and there were only two Bibles in it. He took one of these out and opened the cover of it. It was hollow and contained a pocket flask of whiskey, a pack of cards, and a small blue box with printing on it. He laid these out in front of her one at a time in an evenly-spaced row, like one presenting offerings at the shrine of a goddess. He put the blue box in her hand. THIS PROPERTY TO BE USED ONLY FOR

THE PREVENTION OF DISEASE, she read, and dropped it. The boy was unscrewing the top of the flask. He stopped and pointed, with a smile, to the deck of cards. It was not an ordinary deck but one with an obscene picture on the back of each card. "Take a swig," he said, offering her the bottle first. He held it in front of her, but like one mesmerized, she did not move.

Her voice when she spoke had an almost pleading sound. "Aren't you," she murmured, "aren't you just good country people?"

The boy cocked his head. He looked as if he were just beginning to understand that she might be trying to insult him. "Yeah," he said, curling his lip slightly, "but it ain't held me back none. I'm as good as you any day in the week."

"Give me my leg," she said.

He pushed it farther away with his foot. "Come on now, let's begin to have us a good time," he said coaxingly. "We ain't got to know one another good yet."

"Give me my leg!" she screamed and tried to lunge for it but he pushed her down easily.

"What's the matter with you all of a sudden?" he asked, frowning as he screwed the top on the flask and put it quickly back inside the Bible. "You just a while ago said you didn't believe in nothing. I thought you was some girl!"

Her face was almost purple. "You're a Christian!" she hissed. "You're a fine Christian! You're just like them all—say one thing and do another. You're a perfect Christian, you're . . ."

The boy's mouth was set angrily. "I hope you don't think," he said in a lofty indignant tone, "that I believe in that crap! I may sell Bibles but I know which end is up and I wasn't born yesterday and I know where I'm going!"

"Give me my leg!" she screeched. He jumped up so quickly that she barely saw him sweep the cards and the blue box back into the Bible and throw the Bible into the valise. She saw him grab the leg and then she saw it for an instant slanted forlornly across the inside of the suitcase with a Bible at either side of its opposite ends. He slammed the lid shut and snatched up the valise and swung it down the hole and then stepped through himself.

When all of him had passed but his head, he turned and regarded her with a look that no longer had any admiration in it. "I've gotten a lot of interesting things," he said. "One time I got a woman's glass eye this way. And you needn't to think you'll catch me because Pointer ain't really my

name. I use a different name at every house I call at and don't stay nowhere long. And I'll tell you another thing, Hulga," he said, using the name as if he didn't think much of it, "you ain't so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!" and then the toast-colored hat disappeared down the hole and the girl was left, sitting on the straw in the dusty sunlight. When she turned her churning face toward the opening, she saw his blue figure struggling successfully over the green speckled lake.

Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman, who were in the back pasture, digging up onions, saw him emerge a little later from the woods and head across the meadow toward the highway. "Why, that looks like that nice dull young man that tried to sell me a Bible yesterday," Mrs. Hopewell said, squinting. "He must have been selling them to the Negroes back in there. He was so simple," she said, "but I guess the world would be better off if we were all that simple."

Mrs. Freeman's gaze drove forward and just touched him before he disappeared under the hill. Then she returned her attention to the evil-smelling onion shoot she was lifting from the ground. "Some can't be that simple," she said. "I know I never could."

2.5.1 □ Introduction

Flannery O'Connor is often uncomfortably put into the category of a woman writer, yet such is her perception, gender bias has very little to do with her art. There is a strength and a leaning towards the grotesque that is her hallmark. Like many other women writers of her generation, whose works have great diversity, she refuses to be strait-jacketed. Toni Morrison's concern for the terrible emotional forces driven into the coloured people by the tragedy of American racialism and Alix Shulman's sensitive forays into the dominion of male writers — the novel of ideas the cases in point, show that no water-tight compartments are valid for women writers today. They have their own uniqueness, and a wide-ranging sensibility that opens all doors of possibilities to them. Sulamith Firestone in her amazing book, *The Dialect of sex : The Case for Feninist Revolution*, points out, how earlier, women were banished from the male literary tradition.

Culture is so saturated with male bias that women almost never have a chance to see themselves culturally through their own eyes.

Flannery O'Connor's very sensitive portrayal of sin and suffering does not

stand against her fondness in the portrayal of mothers and daughters. O'Connor's creative energies were often stifled by the terrible degenerative diseases that crippled her through much of her career. It is significant that many of her characters are physically handicapped, or afflicted in some terrible or another. In the short story being analysed — "Good Country people", The girl Hulga possesses just one leg, and the wooden leg that supports her, forms a key motif in the story. It is the defect that makes her unique often with horrifying consequences.

O'Connor died at the young age of thirty nine, in 1964. It is miraculous how her courage and fortitude grew with her pain and deteriorating condition. Her courage and her refusal to wallow in despair, made her commitment to her art very special. Her two short novels and thirty short stories all delve into certain uncomfortable regions of the mind, dealing with behaviour patterns that often shack and embarrass us. The stories feel away illusion, foolish selfishness and mindless cruelty and leave the characters to face the harshness of a truth that they cannot bear. Had Flannery O'Connor lived longer, and shared the full impact and effect of the Feminist Movement, her consciousness might have been more violently aroused.

Art was a specific force for O'Connor — a force outside conditions of gender. Yet we discern a softness for a blood-bond of the mother and the daughter. Her stories are given a certain piquancy as this relationship figures largely in most of them. The stories throb with the perplexing issues of spiritual existence. Though O'Connor begins with the trauma and painful experiences of women, she keeps in perspective those experiences that she felt had universal value. Her themes touch many painful areas of female experience. A Southern, Catholic writer, she shows extraordinary powers in depicting the contortions of spirit with a steady eye and relentless pity. Her collection of short stories *A Good Man is Hard to Find* (1955) contains some of the best and most unsettling fiction of the period. Her terrible vision of the world was enhanced by her two religious novels *Wise Blood* (1952) and *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960). Though her avowed interest did not lie in the creation of the grotesque as such, but rather in the disorders that create or deflect spirit, the story we have at hand is a fine study of the grotesque in human nature and also in the turn of events.

2.5.2 □ “Good Country People” : An Analysis

There are two distinctly disturbing occasions in the story “Good Country People” — one, when the salesman of the holy Bibles takes out his personal copy and reveals that it is nothing but a facade for his baser leanings, and the other, when he cruelly takes away the girl’s artificial leg. There are moments both shocking in their intensity, and just as provoking in their play upon the readers’ mind.

The young salesman, the ironic player on the words ‘good country folk, is a rogue and a hypocrite. He, posing to be ‘good’, cheats the country folk, who, even to the end believe that he is a nice, dull young man.

Religion and the sham that it often passes for it is explored here. The young man takes out a Bible “It was hollow and contained a pocket flask of whiskey, a pack of cards, and a small blue box with printing on it ... The boy was unscrewing the top of the flask. He stopped and pointed with a smile to the deck of cards. It was not an ordinary deck but one with an obscene picture on the back of each card.”

Even as she plaintively asks : “Arn't you just good country people?” he reveals the utter villainy in a cheap, mediocre man, whose guile is mixed with malevolence.

I gotten a lot of interesting things. Once I got a womans' glass eye this way. And you needn't think you'll catch me, because Pointer ain't really my name. I use a different name at every house. I call at and don't stay nowhere long.

There is absolute grotesqueness in the way the man collects things—things that are useless to him, but life-supports to their users.

The placidity and simple faith of the two elderly women, Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman are cleverly juxtaposed against the pathetic defiance of Hulga, and the foxy cunningness of the young salesman, who has his eyes on all the main chances, and is a very glib talker.

2.5.3 □ Narrative Technique

Inexplicable occurrences are O’ Connor's forte. Her story endings are a peculiar blend of the comic (hinging on grotesque) and utter sadness. The grimness of most of her endings pervades the reader's mind for a very long time. Yet in her writings there is a certain element of hope in the recognition of the bleak reality of life and an acceptance, even if the truth hits with a terrible humiliating force.

O'Connor's plots hinge upon these shock interludes. In "Good Country People" the story begins in a dead-pan manner, and then twists and turns its way through seemingly simple occasions. Some of the dullness surrounding Hulga, the girl to whom so much happens in so little an interval, seems to pervade the fabric of the story. The 'gloom', that she often associates with O'Connor lurks at every turn of the narrative, becoming more intense as the story progresses. The ironic intent of the writer runs between the lines.

Flannery O'Connor's understanding of the problems and results of widowhood is truly profound. She is sensitive, probing and scathing at the same time.

Virginia Woolf had categorised (in *A Room of One's Own*) the distortions we can expect to find in the writings of women. Anxiety, buried confusion and shame, caused by the male-dominated culture makes it extremely difficult for women to feel assured about discussing their own experience. Such attitudes result in portraying women who are too aggressive or too strong, and their ambience too uncomfortable to fit into the assigned place in the fictional world. O'Connor's short story "The Enduring Chill" shows the protagonist, a young man, as a pathetic, confused spiritually isolated creature totally unprepared for either life or death "Good Country People", too, hinges on the problem of wasted existence. It is not the girl, Hulga, but the personable young man, who is a moral cripple.

2.5.4 □ Women Characters

One of her favourite methods, as in this short story, is to explore the plight of intelligent and defiant girls who reject traditional submissive roles.

Joy-Hulga, 'a large blonde girl who had an artificial leg—dull to the view, but with a mind of her own (her interesting naming of the two other girls is a hint). Later, she even does a Ph.D, and has a cache of prophetic sayings.

To her own mother she had said without warning, without excuse standing up in the middle of a meal with her face purple and her mouth half-full—'Woman, do you ever look inside? Do you ever look inside and see what you are not?' God !

Hulga is an unusual girl, who is an atheist and declares to the shallow young man quite openly.

We are all damned, but some of us have taken off their blindfolds and see that there is nothing to see. It's a kind of salvation.

In an intimate interlude with the young man, Hulga agilely climbs into the high loft, surprising him. "We won't need the Bible" she tells him.

As he desires to see her artificial leg, he persuades her that it makes her unique. She takes off her leg, her symbol of independence and gives it to him. As he finally discards her, helpless, in the loft and moves off, Hulga maintains her quiet, "sitting on the straw in the dust." The only sign of her heartbreak is the reference to her 'churning face'.

Life, love, hope all touch her and Hulga stoically counter all Trauma. We wonder, though, how she would descend from the loft, the boy having stolen her artificial leg. Expectations of an exciting new life had made her ascend, but as gloom descends upon the despairing girl, her being stuck in the left—an intermediate region, begins to take on symbolic significance.

2.5.5 Conclusion

During the last half-dozen years of life O'Connor enjoyed a growing recognition of her work. Her first collection of short stories, *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, appeared in 1955, and her second novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*, in 1960. At the time few reviewers saw beneath the grotesque surface of her fiction (Granville Hicks called *The Violent Bear It Away* "Southern Gothic with a vengeance") but she was almost unanimously regarded as a writer of originality and power. What was to become a substantial body of criticism of her work began to grow in the wake of her essay "The Fiction Writer and His Country" (1957), in which she discussed the apparent contradiction between her belief in spiritual purpose and the fact that her stories are, "for the most part, about people who are poor, who are afflicted in both mind and body, who have little—or at best distorted— sense of spiritual purpose, and whose actions do not apparently give the reader a great assurance of the joy of life." She also began to be invited to lecture at colleges and writers' conferences, where she spoke on such subjects as "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction" and "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South." (The drafts of these speeches : plus some other essays, were collected and edited by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald under the title *Mystery and Manners*, 1969.)

O'Connor continued to refine the art in which she expressed her vision, but the vision itself did not substantially change from the stories in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* to those in her final collection, *Everything That Rises Must*

Converge (posthumously published 1965). She spoke once, near the end of her life, of attempting something different from what she had been doing so successfully, but in the final months of her life she was still at work on the stories that were to complete her last collection. Following an abdominal operation in the spring of 1964, her lupus flared up again. She survived its onslaught for a few months, but late in July she suffered kidney failure. She died on August 3, 1964, at the age of 39.

2.6 □ "The Cop and the Anthem" : O' Henry

Structure :

- 2.6.0 The Cop and the Anthem
- 2.6.1 The Short Story : An Introduction
- 2.6.2 About the Author
- 2.6.3 "The Cop and the Anthem" : Analysis
- 2.6.4 The Story
- 2.6.5 Conclusion

2.6.0 □ Text : "The Cop and the Anthem"

On his bench in Madison Square Soapy moved uneasily. When wild geese honk high of nights, and when women without sealskin coats grow kind to their husbands, and when Soapy moves uneasily on his bench in the park, you may know that winter is near at hand.

A dead leaf fell in Soapy's lap. That was Jack Frost's card. Jack is kind to the regular denizens of Madison Square, and gives fair warning of his annual call. At the corners of four streets he hands his pasteboard to the North Wind, footman of the mansion of All Outdoors, so that the inhabitants thereof may make ready.

Soapy's mind became cognizant of the fact that the time had come for him to resolve himself into a singular Committee of Ways and Means to provide against the coming rigour. And therefore he moved uneasily on his bench.

The hibernatorial ambitions of Soapy were not of the highest. In them were no considerations of Mediterranean cruises, of soporific Southern skies or drifting in the Vesuvian Bay. Three months on the Island was what his soul craved. Three months of assured board and bed and congenial company, safe from Boreas and bluecoats, seemed to Soapy the essence of things desirable.

For years the hospitable Blackwell's had been his winter quarters. Just as his more fortunate fellow New Yorkers had bought their tickets to Palm Beach and the Riviera each winter, so Soapy had made his humble arrangements for his annual hegira to the Island. And now the time was

come. On the previous night three Sabbath newspapers, distributed beneath his coat, about his ankles and over his lap, had failed to repulse the cold as he slept on his bench near the spurting fountain in the ancient square. So the Island loomed large and timely in Soapy's mind. He scorned the provisions made in the name of charity for the city's dependents. In Soapy's opinion the Law was more benign than Philanthropy. There was an endless round of institutions, municipal and eleemosynary, on which he might set out and receive lodging and food accordant with the simple life. But to one of Soapy's proud spirit the gifts of charity are encumbered. If not in coin you must pay in humiliation of spirit for every benefit received at the hands of philanthropy. As Caesar had his Brutus, every bed of charity must have its toll of a bath, every loaf of bread its compensation of a private and personal inquisition. Wherefore it is better to be a guest of the law, which, though conducted by rules, does not meddle unduly with a gentleman's private affairs.

Soapy, having decided to go to the Island, at once set about accomplishing his desire. There were many easy ways of doing this. The pleasantest was to dine luxuriously at some expensive restaurant; and then, after declaring insolvency, be handed over quietly and without uproar to a policeman. An accommodating Magistrate would do the rest.

Soapy left his bench and strolled out of the square and across the level sea of asphalt, where Broadway and Fifth Avenue flow together. Up Broadway he turned, and halted at a glittering café, where are gathered together nightly the choicest products of the grape, the silkworm and the protoplasm.

Soapy had confidence in himself from the lowest button of his vest upward. He was shaven, and his coat was decent and his neat black, ready-tied four-in-hand had been presented to him by a lady-missionary on Thanksgiving Day. If he could reach a table in the restaurant unsuspected success would be his. The portion of him that would show above the table would raise no doubt in the waiter's mind. A roasted mallard duck, thought Soapy, would be about the thing—with a bottle of Chablis, and then Camembert, a demi-tasse and a cigar. One dollar for the cigar would be enough. The total would not be so high as to call forth any supreme manifestation of revenge from the café management; and yet the meat would leave him filled and happy for the journey to his winter refuge.

But as Soapy set foot inside the restaurant door the head waiter's eye fell upon his frayed trousers and decadent shoes. Strong and ready hands turned him about and conveyed him in silence and haste to the sidewalk and averted the ignoble fate of the menaced mallard.

Soapy turned off Broadway. It seemed that his route to the coveted Island was not to be an epicurean one. Some other way of entering limbo must be thought of.

At a corner of Sixth Avenue electric lights and cunningly displayed wares behind plate-glass made a shop window conspicuous. Soapy took a cobblestone and dashed it through the glass. People came running round the corner, a policeman in the lead. Soapy stood still, with his hands in his pockets, and smiled at the sight of brass buttons.

'Where's the man that done that?' inquired the officer excitedly.

'Don't you figure out that I might have had something to do with it?' said Soapy, not without sarcasm, but friendly, as one greets good fortune.

The policeman's mind refused to accept Soapy even as a clue. Men who smash windows do not remain to parley with the law's minions. They take to their heels. The policeman saw a man halfway down the block running to catch a car. With drawn club he joined in the pursuit. Soapy, with disgust in his heart, loafed along, twice unsuccessful.

On the opposite side of the street was a restaurant of no great pretensions. It catered to large appetites and modest purses. Its crockery and atmosphere were thick; its soup and napery thin. Into this place Soapy took his accusive shoes and tell-tale trousers without challenge. At a table he sat and consumed beefsteak, flapjacks, doughnuts and pie. And then to the waiter he betrayed the fact that the minutest coin and himself were strangers.

'Now, get busy and call a cop,' said Soapy. 'And don't keep a gentleman waiting.'

'No cop for youse,' said the waiter, with a voice like butter cakes and an eye like the cherry in a Manhattan cocktail. 'Hey, Con!'

Neatly upon his left ear on the callous pavement two waiters pitched Soapy. He arose, joint by joint, as a carpenter's rule opens, and beat the dust from his clothes. Arrest seemed but a rosy dream. The Island seemed very far away. A policeman who stood before a drug store two doors away laughed and walked down the street.

Five blocks Soapy travelled before his courage permitted him to woo capture again. This time the opportunity presented what he fatuously termed to himself a 'cinch.' A young woman of a modest and pleasing guise was standing before a show window gazing with sprightly interest at its display of shaving mugs and inkstands, and two yards from the window a large policeman of severe demeanour leaned against a water-plug.

It was Soapy's design to assume the role of the despicable and execrated 'masher.' The refined and elegant appearance of his victim and the contiguity

of the conscientious cop encouraged him to believe that he would soon feel the pleasant official clutch upon his arm that would ensure his winter quarters on the right little, tight little isle.

Soapy straightened the lady missionary's ready-made tie, dragged his shrinking cuffs into the open, set his hat at a killing cant and sidled toward the young woman. He made eyes at her was taken with sudden coughs and 'hems,' smiled, smirked and went brazenly through the impudent and contemptible litany of the mesher.' With half an eye Soapy saw that the policeman was watching him fixedly. The young woman moved away a few steps, and again bestowed her absorbed attention upon the shaving mugs. Soapy followed, boldly stepping to her side, raised his hat and said :

'Ah there, Bedelia! Don't you want to come and play in my yard?'

The policeman was still looking. The persecuted young woman had but to beckon a ringer and Soapy would be practically *en route* for his insular haven. Already he imagined he could feel the cosy warmth of the station-house. The young woman faced him and, stretching out a hand, caught Soapy's coat-sleeve.

'Sure, Mike,' she said joyfully, 'if you'll blow me to a pail of Suds I'd have spoke to you sooner, but the cop was watching.'

With the young woman playing the clinging ivy to his oak Soapy walked past the policeman, overcome with gloom. He seemed doomed to liberty.

At the next corner he shook off his companion and ran. He halted in the district where by night are found the lightest streets, hearts vows and librettos. Women in furs and men in greatcoats moved gaily in the wintry air. A sudden fear seized Soapy that some dreadful enchantment had rendered him immune to arrest. The thought brought a little of panic upon it, and when he came upon another policeman lounging grandly in front of a transplendent theatre he caught at the immediate straw of 'disorderly conduct.'

On the sidewalk Soapy began to yell drunken gibberish at the top of his harsh voice. He danced, howled, raved and otherwise disturbed the welkin.

The policeman twirled his club, turned his back to Soapy and remarked to a citizen :

' 'tis one of them Yale lads celebratin' the goose egg they give to the Hartford College. Noisy; but no harm. We've instructions to lave them be.'

Disconsolate, Soapy ceased his unavailing racket. Would never a policeman lay hands on him? In his fancy the Island seemed an unattainable Arcadia. He buttoned his thin coat against the chilling wind.

In a cigar store he saw a well-dressed man lighting a cigar at a swinging light. His silk umbrella he had set by the door on entering. Soapy stepped

inside, secured the umbrella and sauntered off with it slowly. The man at the cigar light followed hastily.

'My umbrella,' he said sternly.

'Oh, is it?' sneered Soapy, adding insult to petit larceny. 'Well, why don't you call a policeman? I took it. Your umbrella! Why don't you call a cop? There stands one at the corner.'

The umbrella owner slowed his steps. Soapy did likewise, with a presentiment that luck would again run against him. The policeman looked at the two curiously.

'Of course,' said the umbrella man—'that is—well, you know how these mistakes occur—I—if it's your umbrella I hope you'll excuse me—I picked it up this morning in a restaurant—If you recognize it as yours, why—I hope you'll—'

'Of course it's mine,' said Soapy viciously.

The ex-umbrella man retreated. The policeman hurried to assist a tall blonde in an opera cloak across the street in front of a street car that was approaching two blocks away.

Soapy walked eastward through a street damaged by improvements. He hurled the umbrella wrathfully into an excavation. He muttered against the men who wear helmets and carry clubs. Because he wanted to fall into their clutches, they seemed to regard him as a king who could do no wrong.

At length Soapy reached one of the avenues to the east where the glitter and turmoil was but faint. He set his face down this toward Madison Square, for the homing instinct survives even when the home is a park bench.

But on an unusually quiet corner Soapy came to a standstill. Here was an old church, quaint and rambling and gabled. Through one violet-stained window a soft light glowed, where, no doubt, the organist loitered over the keys, making sure of his mastery of the coming Sabbath anthem. For there drifted out to Soapy's ears sweet music that caught and held him transfixed against the convolutions of the iron fence.

The moon was above, lustrous and serene; vehicles and pedestrians were few; sparrows twittered sleepily in the eaves—for a little while the scene might have been a country churchyard. And the anthem that the organist played cemented Soapy to the iron fence, for he had known it well in the days when his life contained such things as mothers and roses and ambitions and friends and immaculate thoughts and collars.

The conjunction of Soapy's receptive state of mind and the influences about the old church wrought a sudden and wonderful change in his soul. He viewed with swift horror the pit into which he had tumbled, the degraded

days, unworthy desires, dead hopes, wrecked faculties and base motives that made up his existence.

And also in a moment his heart responded thrillingly to this novel mood. An instantaneous and strong impulse moved him to battle with his desperate fate. He would pull himself out of the mire, he would make a man of himself again; he would conquer the evil that had taken possession of him. There was time; he was comparatively young yet; he would resurrect his old eager ambitions and pursue them without faltering. Those solemn but sweet organ notes had set up a revolution in him. To-morrow he would go into the roaring down-town district and find work. A fur importer had once offered him a place as driver. He would find him to-morrow and ask for the position. He would be somebody in the world. He would—

Soapy felt a hand laid on his arm. He looked quickly around into the broad face of a policeman.

‘What are you doin’ here?’ asked the officer.

‘Nothin’,’ said Soapy.

‘Then come along,’ said the policeman.

‘Three months on the Island,’ said the Magistrate in the Police Court the next morning.

2.6.1 □ The Short Story

Suzanne Ferguson ably discuss this form in *The Rise of the Short Story in the Hierarchy of Genres*. The tendency in the modern high-brow story to focus upon a moment of illumination near the end of the story, a moment in which apparently disparate threads of the characters’ experience are drawn together into an intelligible pattern, rather than a traditionally prepared plot climax, is very much dependent upon, and perhaps readable because of, the prominent popular success of the middlebrow detective story in the preceding decades.

Both of these relatively low-prestige forms contributed importantly to the grooming of the English short story for its assault on the generic high society. Local color did so by foregrounding the detailed local setting, with its emphasis on realistic natural and social scenes (and thus “atmosphere”) and with its relative deemphasis on plot. The detective story left its trace in the assumption of the setting into the impetus of plot and in the omission of certain expected elements in the plot that were simply deduced and tacitly supplied by the reader, never actually told in the story. In both, the importance of setting seems to have influenced the modern short story, where it is

frequently made to convey ideas about characters and feelings as well as merely place, simply through being given extraordinary prominence while other elements are left obscure and undeveloped. This very obscurity, which requires of the audience special reading techniques, became essential to the "glamor" of the short story for its modern writers and readers.

Emerging in the last two decades of the century, the aesthetic story put the finishing touches on the restyling of the English short story for modern tastes. Another variation of the romance, this type utilized the descriptive techniques and gradual heightening of psychological tension of the sensation story and the concealment of meaning associated with the detective story, along with "fine writing," to make an overt bid for high prestige. Its preoccupation with its own preciousness, together with its frequently morbid themes, earned it the epithet "decadent" as well as "aesthetic."¹ Writers and critics began to claim this type of story to be superior to the novel in artistry because the short story was more controlled, intense, and, finally, reflective of life itself.

Writers for glossy, arty magazines such as the *Yellow Book* and *Savoy*, many of the "aesthetes" were drawn to poetry as well as prose. Ernest Dowson, and even Yeats, on occasion, wrote stories utilizing what are usually considered poetic stylistic devices: figures of speech, metaphorical imagery, purple descriptions, deliberately stylized rhythms and aural tropes. Others of this loosely identifiable group, such as Frederick Wedmore, Hubert Crackanthorpe, Ella D'Arcy, and George Egerton, concentrated on developing sketchy, psychologically complex plots in addition to poetic prose.² Influenced by Russian writers, especially Turgenev, George Moore wrote identifiably impressionist stories in his local-color collection, *The Untied Field* (1901 in Gaelic, 1903 in English), which in turn inspired, or influenced, *Dubliners*. The self-consciousness of aesthetic artistry in the short story, encouraged by Flaubertian novelist-critics such as Henry James, Conrad, and Ford Madox Ford, influenced the next generation of short story writers, who "invented" for England the modern, prestige short story: Joyce, Mansfield, Lawrence, the later Kipling, and then the generation of Elizabeth Bowen, A. E. Coppard, V. S. Pritchett, and Sean O'Faolain. Significantly, James later wrote of the *Yellow Book*, in his preface to Volume XV of the New York Edition of his works, that it "opened up the millenium to the 'short story.'" Wells, in the

1. See John R. Reed, *Decadent Style* (Athens, Ohio, 1985), for a full discussion of the relationship.
2. An art critic as well as a writer, Wedmore wrote an important essay on the artfulness of the highbrow short story in his *On Books and Arts* (London, 1899), 1-24.

preface to his collection of short stories, *The Country of the Blind* (1911), approvingly characterized a catalog of short story writers from the nineties as “a mixed handful of jewels drawn from a bag.”

More than any other single quality, artistry itself, as a highbrow value, pitched the short story genre above the popular, middlebrow status it had throughout most of the nineteenth century. The mysteriousness of the modern short story, its being written in a code of generic and stylistic conventions that only the initiate of modern art could decipher, was part and parcel of this success. Although the highbrow novel for a time certainly shared not only the emphasis on artistry but the precise techniques of literary impressionism—fragmentation, sketchiness, time shifts, exploitation of unusual points of view, stylistic foregrounding—its length permitted a fuller and ultimately more traditional development. I have contended that it is primarily that difference in length, and what goes into the impressionist novel to create that length, that differentiates it from the impressionist short story, rather than some essential difference in vision, form, or technique.³ The elaboration of formal and stylistic elements in the smaller space of the short story contributed to a certain element of detachment, “coolness” in the aesthetic medium, that made clear to the story’s audience the intellectual effort necessary to decipher its meaning, in contrast to the “warm” emotional milieu of the longer, more experiential novel.

Moreover, in the early decades of the twentieth century, moral uncertainties about existing class structures allowed rhetorically powerful “post-aesthete” writers and critics such as Ezra Pound and Ford Madox Ford the opportunity to argue for a modernist aristocracy in the arts, which, though not specifically concerned with the short story, benefited it as a modern form. In this view, artists and intellectuals rather than the politically or economically powerful are the possessors of a superior vision, which they exhibit in the secret, refined languages of their art. The codes of this art were so esoteric (and often so deliberately offensive to middlebrow taste) that the general public was sometimes moved to assault exhibits or performances verbally and even physically, in notorious outbursts that now seem merely quaint. A less public art than music, painting, or sculpture, the short story escaped such demonstrations, (Perhaps excepting the destruction of the plates and type for what was to have been the first edition of Joyce’s *Dubliners*, in a printer’s objection to its content, rather than its form.) Rejection by the lowbrow became a touchstone of high modernist art, and to be too popular,

3. Suzanne Ferguson, “Defining the Short Story: Impressionism and Form,” *Modern Fiction Studies*, XXVIII (1982), 13-24.

as Dickens was, or Kipling in his early years, was to court critical deprecation. Appreciation of the short story, along with that of other modernist art forms, became connoisseurship.

But beyond the formal changes, beyond the changes simply deriving from the short story's imitation of twentieth- rather than nineteenth-century behavior, speech, and details of everyday life, the pre-eminence of the short story as a modernist genre grew out of the modern, highbrow audience's acceptance of fragmentation as an accurate model of the world, with a concomitant focus on "being"—as in Woolf's "moments of being"—rather than the "becoming" that characterizes the plot of the Romantic and the Victorian novel. The brevity that marked "minor" to earlier generations became a badge of the short story's superior representational capacity. For a brief period, in English literature, at least, the short story became not just a prestige genre but the genre that could be said to best represent the essence of the age, as did drama at the end of the sixteenth century.

Thus, by persistently trying to move into the prestige circles of the genres ... poetry, drama and the novel...the short story came into its own 'social' success, producing a highbrow heir to low and middlebrow heir."

2.6.2 □ About the Author

William Sydney Porter used O'Henry as his *nom de plume*. He wrote humorous, poignant tales with a twist at the end. Some of his tales were out-landish, but always meticulously plotted.

O'Henry specialised in the human of incongruity and surprise, in his endings and in his humorous combinations and distortion of words. He used malapropisms, comic companions and tall tale conceits.

The tall tale was traditionally a fictional narrative told as fiction, but it masqueraded as true narration of a personal narrative. It was the narrator's design to present it as true and the listeners acted as though they believed it to be true. O'Henry in his stories often used the tall tale atmosphere and the tall tale technique. Many of the hundreds of stories he wrote continue to delight readers to this day.

O'Henry died in 1910 at the age of 48. The O'Henry Prize—an award instituted in his honour is considered America's most prestigious award for short fiction.

2.6.3 □ "The Cop and the Anthem" : Analysis

The boundless charity that O'Henry had for his fellow human beings is revealed in this short story. Almost Biblical in its references to crime and punishment, views of sin and absolution and profound sympathy, the story has universal scope. The racy style and colloquial language, as well as the intimate tone of narration have endeared O'Henry's stories to generations readers.

2.6.4 □ The Story

Soapy, a petty criminal is the hero of this brilliant short story. Soapy had no faith in charity.

As Caesar had his Brutus, every bed of charity must have its fall of a bath, every loaf of bread its compensation of a private and personal inquisition. Wherefore it is better to be a guest of the law, which though conducted by rules, does not meddle unduly with a gentleman's private affairs.

O'Henry loves the Manhattan and his tongue in cheek humour plays around this urban centre and its busy denizens. The very vulnerable individual is mostly juxtaposed against heartless institutions. O'Henry's faith in mankind is palpable in most of his stories—virtuous and flawed, all men share his warm acceptance, and this endears him to readers round the globe and down the years.

The story begins with a tramp, Soapy, panicking at the premonition of the oncoming winter, and trying to get himself into the jail's security for the winter months.

Soapy looks at the glittering cafe, where, in O'Henry's inimitable language :

... are gathered together nightly the choicest products of the grape, the silkworm and the protoplasm.

In a hilarious manner, the writer presents the plight of Soapy who does one petty crime after another so that he would be arrested and put into prison for most of the harsh winter months. His plan to gatecrash an expensive restaurant fails and even when he smashes a shop window and confesses to the misdeed the police do not arrest him. When, desperate, he finally eats a hearty meal and declines to pay, the waiters manhandle him and throw him out.

"Arrest seemed but a rosy dream, The Island seemed very far away."

His attempt at eve-teasing, with a policeman looking on, was doomed. The elegant lady turned out to be a common street-walker and began seriously propositioning him.

All his attempts failed. He raved, ranted and created a terrible nuisance. But the police mistook him for a celebrating Yale student and ignored him. He pilfered a man's umbrella, and declared his offence. The man, who was not really the owner of the umbrella, sheepishly gave up all claims. Soapy just could not get himself arrested.

As he came upon an old church, Soapy was transfixed by the sweet music coming from within.

The anthem the organist played cemented Soapy to the iron fence, for he had known it well in the days when his life contained such things as mothers and roses and ambitions and friends and immaculate thoughts and collars.

Soapy in a trance, looked back in distaste upon his present degradation, and effect of the music swayed him to the very core. He began promising himself that he would climb out of the self-created rut and that he would vanquish the evil that had possessed him.

There was time : he was comparatively young yet, he would resurrect his old eager ambitions and pursue them without faltering.

As the anthem swelled to a crescendo, Soapy's resolutions became firmer. He would be somebody in the world, he decided. Just as he was about to take forth a step as a changed man, The police arrested him on charges of loitering and of being a vagabond. The Magistrate gave him the much-desired sentence of his—three months on the Island, only Soapy did not want it now. The Church music had metamorphosed him, he had virtuous intentions. But it was too late.

2.6.5 Conclusion

Irony is O'Henry's forte. Very gently he demonstrates how puny the efforts of human kind are in the face of destiny. Bitter sweet experiences crowd upon a person as he goes through life, and it touches us to the very soul.

Even as the Soviet-American hostilities enhanced, and 'communism' became a dirty word in the U.S., O' Henry remained a perennial favourite with readers. He was popular not only with the masses, but also with many of the Soviet writers, who studied him for his technique so that stories with an O'Henry Twist were being published in Russia at a time when American short-story writers were imitating Chekhov.

The out-of work law clerk, the humble typist, the millionaire's girl, the

bell-boy, the small trader with great ambitions—O'Henry's world was crowded with mundane, very urban characters who have a spark of something unique amidst all their mundane existence. The meticulous details of their speech, dress and habits are products of long years of close observation. O' Henry in a very Chaucerian way is infinitely forgiving, very understanding and tolerant of small human flaws.

The cynical wit of George Ade, expressed in slang (in *Fables in Slang*, 1899), found reflection, though in a gentler manner, in the slang often found in O' Henry's stories. It was a slang that gave America a common speech in those days before the radio. The colloquial voice of New York specially Manhattan, rings clearly in most of his stories, lending them a uniqueness and immediacy that is appreciable. His strong belief that mankind is redeemable, even under hopeless conditions, instill hope among his readers and renews faith in humanity.