



SUNSHINE STATE STANDARDS
Reading Process & Literary Analysis
Benchmark LA.1112.1.7.3 Determine the main idea or essential message....

Benchmark LA.1112.2.1.7 Analyze, interpret, and evaluate an author's use of descriptive language (e.g., irony)....

NOTABLE QUOTE

"The truth is I like [my stories] better than anybody and I read them over and laugh and laugh."

FYI

Did you know that Flannery O'Connor ...

- began writing and illustrating stories at the age of 6?
- enrolled in college at age 16, graduating three years later?
- created cartoons for her high school newspaper?
- raised peacocks on her farm in Georgia?

AuthorOnline

For more on Flannery O'Connor, visit the Literature Center at ClassZone.com.

The Life You Save May Be Your Own

Short Story by Flannery O'Connor



Flannery O'Connor

1925–1964

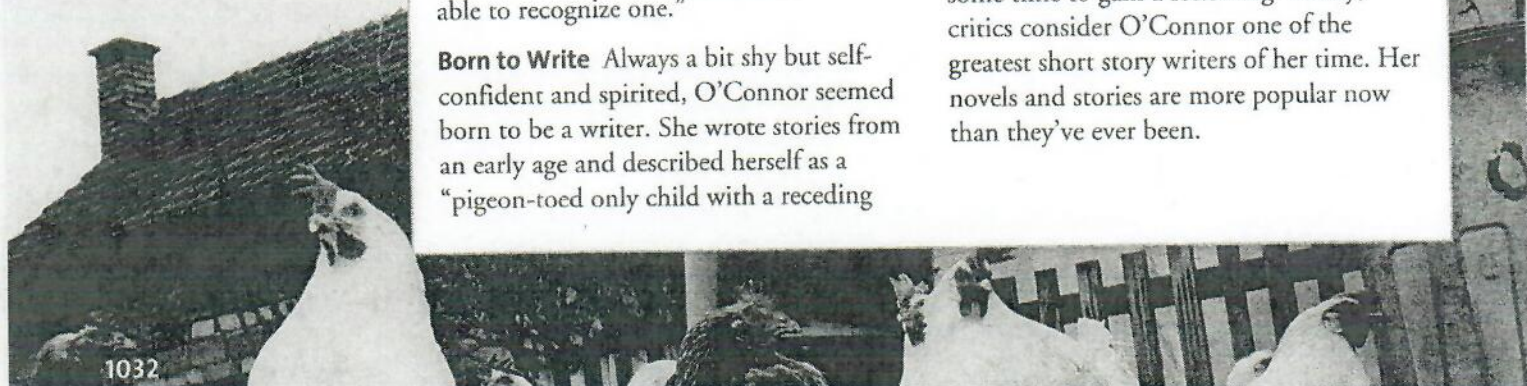
As a child, Flannery O'Connor had a pet chicken that could walk backwards as well as forwards. News reporters—including a photographer all the way from New York City—were dispatched to her home in Savannah, Georgia, to take pictures of the unusual chicken. This experience, O'Connor later said, marked her for life. It began her preoccupation with the grotesque, a fascination she shares with other writers belonging to the literary tradition known as Southern Gothic. "Whenever I am asked why Southern writers particularly have a penchant for writing about freaks," O'Connor once commented, "I say it is because we are still able to recognize one."

Born to Write Always a bit shy but self-confident and spirited, O'Connor seemed born to be a writer. She wrote stories from an early age and described herself as a "pigeon-toed only child with a receding

chin and a you-leave-me-alone-or-I'll-bite-you complex." In high school, she listed her hobby as "collecting rejection slips," as she was already sending out her stories to major literary journals. After graduating from college, she received a scholarship to attend the famed Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa. In the late 1940s, she was twice invited to Yaddo, an exclusive artists' colony in upstate New York. In both places, she made lasting friends and developed the contacts she needed to succeed in the literary world.

A Life Cut Short At the age of 25, while writing her first novel, *Wise Blood* (1952), O'Connor was stricken with lupus, an autoimmune disease that had killed her father 9 years earlier. She moved with her mother to a farm outside of Milledgeville, Georgia, where she used her remaining 14 years to produce two highly acclaimed volumes of stories and another novel, *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960).

Defined by Region and Religion Being a Catholic in largely Protestant Georgia gave O'Connor a unique perspective. The South offered rich subject matter—sometimes violent, often humorous—and her Catholicism provided a unifying vision of the divine in everyday life. Her works, often difficult to categorize and to fully understand, weren't bestsellers and took some time to gain a following. Today, critics consider O'Connor one of the greatest short story writers of her time. Her novels and stories are more popular now than they've ever been.



Could you spot a CON ARTIST?

KEY IDEA We've all seen—or heard of or read about—an instance in which someone was duped by a con artist. If you've ever watched a schemer in action, you may have thought to yourself, "I never would have fallen for that one." But literature, movies, and even newspapers are full of stories of people being conned. Why? What makes a con artist's **deception** so hard to spot?

QUICKWRITE Write a quick description of a con you've seen—on the big screen or in real life—or read about. Why do you think the victim fell for the con artist's antics? What traits did the con artist possess? If you'd been in the victim's shoes, do you honestly think you could have seen through the con artist's scheme, or would you too have been duped?

LITERARY ANALYSIS: IRONY

Irony is a contrast between appearance and actuality. You'll notice two kinds of irony at work in the story you're about to read.

- **Dramatic irony** occurs when readers know more about a situation than the characters themselves know—as though the writer is letting you in on a secret the characters aren't privy to.
- **Situational irony** is a contrast between what a character or reader expects to happen and what actually does happen. This kind of irony often takes the reader by surprise.

Irony is often indirect and subtle, making it difficult to detect. Recognizing it, however, can make a work infinitely more striking and memorable. As you read "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," look for examples of both situational and dramatic irony.

READING SKILL: ANALYZE DESCRIPTIVE DETAILS

O'Connor asserted that "distortion is the only way to make people see." To that end, she employed a wealth of **descriptive details** to flesh out her grotesque characters and their often perverse situations. As you read, use a chart like the one shown to note examples of these details. Record your personal reactions as well as your analysis of what these details reveal or highlight about the characters and their bizarre behavior.

Striking Details from the Story	My Reactions	Analysis
"He offered the old woman a piece [of gum] but she only raised her upper lip to indicate she had no teeth."	This old woman gives me the creeps. I can picture her hostile stance and her toothless gums.	The woman lives in a poor, isolated area and probably doesn't have access to dental or medical care. But she's not ashamed of her circumstances, and she doesn't waste words explaining herself.



The Life You Save May Be Your Own

Flannery O'Connor

The old woman and her daughter were sitting on their porch when Mr. Shiftlet came up their road for the first time. The old woman slid to the edge of her chair and leaned forward, shading her eyes from the piercing sunset with her hand. The daughter could not see far in front of her and continued to play with her fingers. Although the old woman lived in this desolate spot with only her daughter and she had never seen Mr. Shiftlet before, she could tell, even from a distance, that he was a tramp and no one to be afraid of. His left coat sleeve was folded up to show there was only half an arm in it, and his gaunt figure listed slightly to the side as if the breeze were pushing him. He had on a black town suit and a brown felt hat
10 that was turned up in the front and down in the back and he carried a tin tool box by a handle. He came on, at an amble, up her road, his face turned toward the sun which appeared to be balancing itself on the peak of a small mountain.

The old woman didn't change her position until he was almost into her yard; then she rose with one hand fisted on her hip. The daughter, a large girl in a short blue organdy dress, saw him all at once and jumped up and began to stamp and point and make excited speechless sounds. **A**

Mr. Shiftlet stopped just inside the yard and set his box on the ground and tipped his hat at her as if she were not in the least afflicted; then he turned toward the old woman and swung the hat all the way off. He had long black slick hair
20 that hung flat from a part in the middle to beyond the tips of his ears on either side. His face descended in forehead for more than half its length and ended suddenly with his features just balanced over a jutting steel-trap jaw. He seemed to be a young man but he had a look of composed¹ dissatisfaction as if he understood life thoroughly.

"Good evening," the old woman said. She was about the size of a cedar fence post and she had a man's gray hat pulled down low over her head.

1. **composed:** calm; cool and collected.

ANALYZE VISUALS

What compositional elements lend this scene a sense of isolation? Cite specific examples in your answer.

A ANALYZE DETAILS

Reread lines 1–16, recording in your chart the descriptive details O'Connor includes about each character. What does the old woman's body language suggest about her character? What does the girl's behavior indicate?

Light of Lagrange (1997), Billy Morrow Jackson. Watercolor, 22" × 29".
© Billy Morrow Jackson.

The tramp stood looking at her and didn't answer. He turned his back and faced the sunset. He swung both his whole and his short arm up slowly so that they indicated an expanse of sky and his figure formed a crooked cross. The old
30 woman watched him with her arms folded across her chest as if she were the owner of the sun, and the daughter watched, her head thrust forward and her fat helpless hands hanging at the wrists. She had long pink-gold hair and eyes as blue as a peacock's neck.

He held the pose for almost fifty seconds and then he picked up his box and came on to the porch and dropped down on the bottom step. "Lady," he said in a firm nasal voice, "I'd give a fortune to live where I could see me a sun do that every evening."

"Does it every evening," the old woman said and sat back down. The daughter sat down too and watched him with a cautious sly look as if he were a bird that
40 had come up very close. He leaned to one side, rooting in his pants pocket, and in a second he brought out a package of chewing gum and offered her a piece. She took it and unpeeled it and began to chew without taking her eyes off him. He offered the old woman a piece but she only raised her upper lip to indicate she had no teeth.

Mr. Shiftlet's pale, sharp glance had already passed over everything in the yard—the pump near the corner of the house and the big fig tree that three or four chickens were preparing to roost in—and had moved to a shed where he saw the square rusted back of an automobile. "You ladies drive?" he asked.

"That car ain't run in fifteen year," the old woman said. "The day my husband
50 died, it quit running."

"Nothing is like it used to be, lady," he said. "The world is almost rotten."

"That's right," the old woman said. "You from around here?"

"Name Tom T. Shiftlet," he murmured, looking at the tires.

"I'm pleased to meet you," the old woman said. "Name Lucynell Crater and daughter Lucynell Crater. What you doing around here, Mr. Shiftlet?"

He judged the car to be about a 1928 or '29 Ford. "Lady," he said, and turned and gave her his full attention, "lemme tell you something. There's one of these doctors in Atlanta that's taken a knife and cut the human heart—the human
60 heart," he repeated, leaning forward, "out of a man's chest and held it in his hand," and he held his hand out, palm up, as if it were slightly weighted with the human heart, "and studied it like it was a day-old chicken, and lady," he said, allowing a long significant pause in which his head slid forward and his clay-colored eyes brightened, "he don't know no more about it than you or me."

"That's right," the old woman said.

"Why, if he was to take that knife and cut into every corner of it, he still wouldn't know no more than you or me. What you want to bet?"

"Nothing," the old woman said wisely. "Where you come from, Mr. Shiftlet?"

He didn't answer. He reached into his pocket and brought out a sack of tobacco and a package of cigarette papers and rolled himself a cigarette, expertly with one
70 hand, and attached it in a hanging position to his upper lip. Then he took a box of wooden matches from his pocket and struck one on his shoe. He held the burning match as if he were studying the mystery of flame while it traveled dangerously

toward his skin. The daughter began to make loud noises and to point to his hand and shake her finger at him, but when the flame was just before touching him, he leaned down with his hand cupped over it as if he were going to set fire to his nose and lit the cigarette. **B**

He flipped away the dead match and blew a stream of gray into the evening. A sly look came over his face. "Lady," he said, "nowadays, people'll do anything anyways. I can tell you my name is Tom T. Shiftlet and I come from Tarwater, Tennessee, but
80 you never have seen me before: how you know I ain't lying? How you know my name ain't Aaron Sparks, lady, and I come from Singleberry, Georgia, or how you know it's not George Speeds and I come from Lucy, Alabama, or how you know I ain't Thompson Bright from Toolafalls, Mississippi?"

"I don't know nothing about you," the old woman muttered, irked.

"Lady," he said, "people don't care how they lie. Maybe the best I can tell you is, I'm a man; but listen lady," he said and paused and made his tone more ominous still, "what is a man?"

The old woman began to gum a seed. "What you carry in that tin box, Mr. Shiftlet?" she asked.

90 "Tools," he said, put back. "I'm a carpenter."

"Well, if you come out here to work, I'll be able to feed you and give you a place to sleep but I can't pay. I'll tell you that before you begin," she said.

There was no answer at once and no particular expression on his face. He leaned back against the two-by-four that helped support the porch roof. "Lady," he said slowly, "there's some men that some things mean more to them than money." The old woman rocked without comment and the daughter watched the trigger that moved up and down in his neck. He told the old woman then that all most people were interested in was money, but he asked what a man was made for. He asked her if a man was made for money, or what. He asked her
100 what she thought she was made for but she didn't answer, she only sat rocking and wondered if a one-armed man could put a new roof on her garden house. He asked a lot of questions that she didn't answer. He told her that he was twenty-eight years old and had lived a varied life. He had been a gospel singer, a foreman on the railroad, an assistant in an undertaking parlor, and he come over the radio for three months with Uncle Roy and his Red Creek Wranglers. He said he had fought and bled in the Arm Service of his country and visited every foreign land and that everywhere he had seen people that didn't care if they did a thing one way or another. He said he hadn't been raised thataway. **C**

A fat yellow moon appeared in the branches of the fig tree as if it were going to
110 roost there with the chickens. He said that a man had to escape to the country to see the world whole and that he wished he lived in a desolate place like this where he could see the sun go down every evening like God made it to do.

"Are you married or are you single?" the old woman asked.

There was a long silence. "Lady," he asked finally, "where would you find you an innocent woman today? I wouldn't have any of this trash I could just pick up."

The daughter was leaning very far down, hanging her head almost between her knees watching him through a triangular door she had made in her overturned

B ANALYZE DETAILS

Consider the wealth of details O'Connor offers about Tom Shiftlet in lines 45–76. Which details serve to reveal his important traits?

C IRONY

Reread lines 105–108. Explain the irony of Shiftlet's statement that he served in the "Arm Service."

hair; and she suddenly fell in a heap on the floor and began to whimper. Mr. Shiftlet straightened her out and helped her get back in the chair.

120 “Is she your baby girl?” he asked.

“My only,” the old woman said, “and she’s the sweetest girl in the world. I would give her up for nothing on earth. She’s smart too. She can sweep the floor, cook, wash, feed the chickens, and hoe. I wouldn’t give her up for a casket of jewels.” **D**

“No,” he said kindly, “don’t ever let any man take her away from you.”

“Any man come after her,” the old woman said, “’ll have to stay around the place.”

Mr. Shiftlet’s eye in the darkness was focused on a part of the automobile bumper that glittered in the distance. “Lady,” he said, jerking his short arm up as
130 if he could point with it to her house and yard and pump, “there ain’t a broken thing on this plantation that I couldn’t fix for you, one-arm jackleg² or not. I’m a man,” he said with a sullen dignity, “even if I ain’t a whole one. I got,” he said, tapping his knuckles on the floor to emphasize the immensity of what he was going to say, “a moral intelligence!” and his face pierced out of the darkness into a shaft of doorlight and he stared at her as if he were astonished himself at this impossible truth.

The old woman was not impressed with the phrase. “I told you you could hang around and work for food,” she said, “if you don’t mind sleeping in that car yonder.”

“Why listen, Lady,” he said with a grin of delight, “the monks of old slept in
140 their coffins!”

“They wasn’t as advanced as we are,” the old woman said.

The next morning he began on the roof of the garden house while Lucynell, the daughter, sat on a rock and watched him work. He had not been around a week before the change he had made in the place was apparent. He had patched the front and back steps, built a new hog pen, restored a fence, and taught Lucynell, who was completely deaf and had never said a word in her life, to say the word “bird.” The big rosy-faced girl followed him everywhere, saying “Burrtdtdt ddbirrrtdt,” and clapping her hands. The old woman watched from a distance, secretly pleased. She was ravenous for a son-in-law.

150 Mr. Shiftlet slept on the hard narrow back seat of the car with his feet out the side window. He had his razor and a can of water on a crate that served him as a bedside table and he put up a piece of mirror against the back glass and kept his coat neatly on a hanger that he hung over one of the windows.

In the evenings he sat on the steps and talked while the old woman and Lucynell rocked violently in their chairs on either side of him. The old woman’s three mountains were black against the dark blue sky and were visited off and on by various planets and by the moon after it had left the chickens. Mr. Shiftlet pointed out that the reason he had improved this plantation was because he had taken a personal interest in it. He said he was even going to make the automobile run.

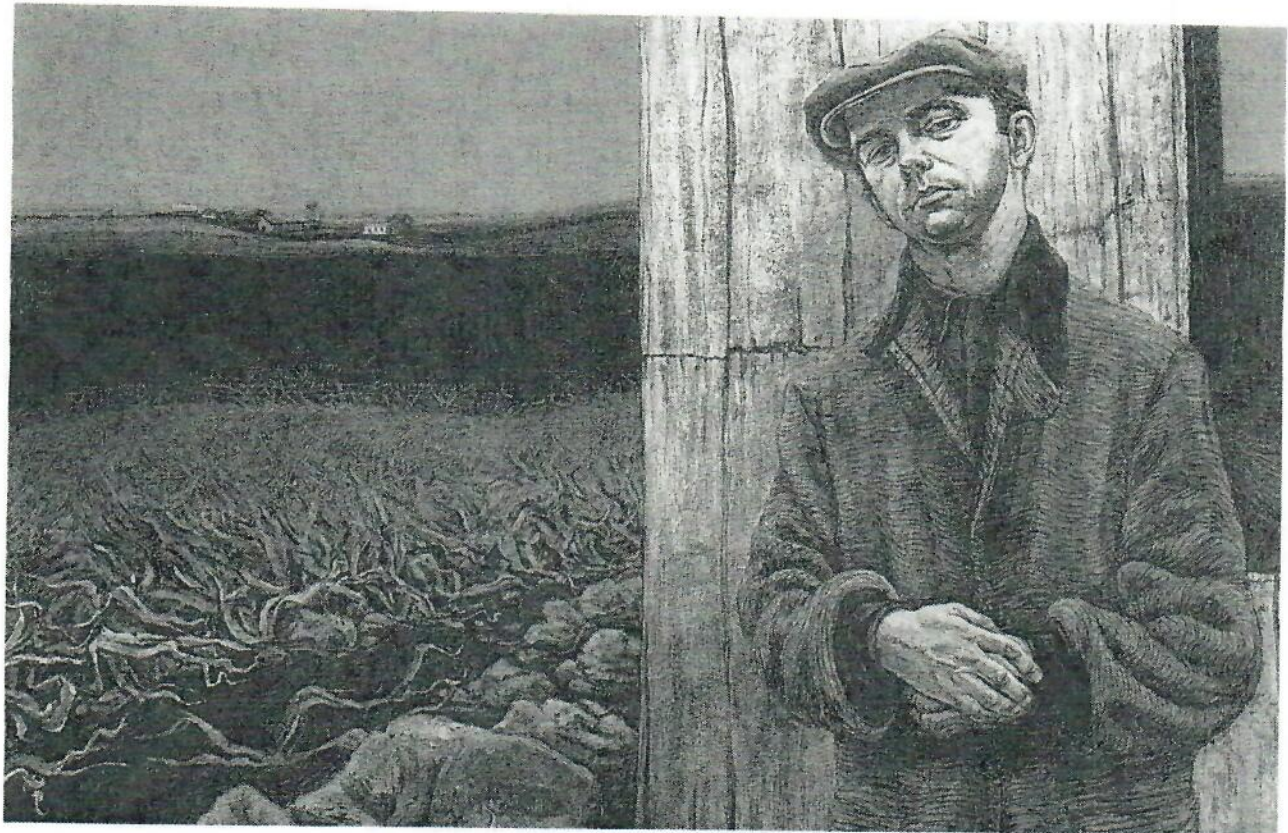
D IRONY

O’Connor employs irony not just in her descriptions of her characters, but in their dialogue, as well. Reread lines 120–124. What double meaning might be suggested by the phrase “I would give her up for nothing on earth”?

ANALYZE VISUALS

Note that the painting on page 1039 is titled *The Interloper*. An interloper is an intruder. What does this title suggest about the man and the farmhouse depicted? How does the title work with the elements of the painting to establish a mood? Explain.

2. **Jackleg:** someone who does work he or she has not been trained to do.



The Interloper (1958), Billy Morrow Jackson. Collection of Mrs. Virginia Penofsky.

160 He had raised the hood and studied the mechanism and he said he could tell that the car had been built in the days when cars were really built. You take now, he said, one man puts in one bolt and another man puts in another bolt and another man puts in another bolt so that it's a man for a bolt. That's why you have to pay so much for a car: you're paying all those men. Now if you didn't have to pay but one man, you could get you a cheaper car and one that had had a personal interest taken in it, and it would be a better car. The old woman agreed with him that this was so.

Mr. Shiftlet said that the trouble with the world was that nobody cared, or stopped and took any trouble. He said he never would have been able to teach

170 Lucynell to say a word if he hadn't cared and stopped long enough. **E**

"Teach her to say something else," the old woman said.

"What you want her to say next?" Mr. Shiftlet asked.

The old woman's smile was broad and toothless and suggestive. "Teach her to say 'sugarpie,'" she said.

Mr. Shiftlet already knew what was on her mind. **F**

The next day he began to tinker with the automobile, and that evening he told her that if she would buy a fan belt, he would be able to make the car run.

The old woman said she would give him the money. "You see that girl yonder?" she asked, pointing to Lucynell who was sitting on the floor a foot away, watching

E IRONY

A "1928 or '29 Ford" like this one would, in fact, have been made on an assembly line, a feature that greatly reduced the cost of automobiles. What does this knowledge, combined with Shiftlet's statements in lines 160–170, tell you about his character? Explain which type of irony O'Connor is using here.

F ANALYZE DETAILS

What are Mrs. Crater's motives for wanting Lucynell to learn to say "sugarpie"? What details in line 173 suggest this?

180 him, her eyes blue even in the dark. "If it was ever a man wanted to take her away, I would say, 'No man on earth is going to take that sweet girl of mine away from me!' but if he was to say, 'Lady, I don't want to take her away, I want her right here,' I would say, 'Mister, I don't blame you none. I wouldn't pass up a chance to live in a permanent place and get the sweetest girl in the world myself. You ain't no fool,' I would say."

"How old is she?" Mr. Shiftlet asked casually.

"Fifteen, sixteen," the old woman said. The girl was nearly thirty but because of her innocence it was impossible to guess.

190 "It would be a good idea to paint it too," Mr. Shiftlet remarked. "You don't want it to rust out."

"We'll see about that later," the old woman said.

The next day he walked into town and returned with the parts he needed and a can of gasoline. Late in the afternoon, terrible noises issued from the shed and the old woman rushed out of the house, thinking Lucynell was somewhere having a fit. Lucynell was sitting on a chicken crate, stamping her feet and screaming, "Burrddttt! bddurrdtttt!" but her fuss was drowned out by the car. With a volley of blasts it emerged from the shed, moving in a fierce and stately way. Mr. Shiftlet was in the driver's seat, sitting very erect. He had an expression of serious modesty on his face as if he had just raised the dead.

200 That night, rocking on the porch, the old woman began her business at once. "You want you an innocent woman, don't you?" she asked sympathetically. "You don't want none of this trash."

"No'm, I don't," Mr. Shiftlet said.

"One that can't talk," she continued, "can't sass you back or use foul language. That's the kind for you to have. Right there," and she pointed to Lucynell sitting cross-legged in her chair, holding both feet in her hands.

"That's right," he admitted. "She wouldn't give me any trouble."

"Saturday," the old woman said, "you and her and me can drive into town and get married."

210 Mr. Shiftlet eased his position on the steps.

"I can't get married right now," he said. "Everything you want to do takes money and I ain't got any."

"What you need with money?" she asked.

"It takes money," he said. "Some people'll do anything anyhow these days, but the way I think, I wouldn't marry no woman that I couldn't take on a trip like she was somebody. I mean take her to a hotel and treat her. I wouldn't marry the Duchesser Windsor,"³ he said firmly, "unless I could take her to a hotel and give her something good to eat."

220 "I was raised thataway and there ain't a thing I can do about it. My old mother taught me how to do."

"Lucynell don't even know what a hotel is," the old woman muttered. "Listen here, Mr. Shiftlet," she said, sliding forward in her chair, "you'd be getting a

3. **Duchesser Windsor:** Duchess of Windsor. The title was given to the American divorcée Wallace Simpson upon her marriage to the former Edward VIII of England in 1937.

permanent house and a deep well and the most innocent girl in the world. You don't need no money. Lemme tell you something: there ain't any place in the world for a poor disabled friendless drifting man."

The ugly words settled in Mr. Shiftlet's head like a group of buzzards in the top of a tree. He didn't answer at once. He rolled himself a cigarette and lit it and then he said in an even voice, "Lady, a man is divided into two parts, body and spirit."

The old woman clamped her gums together.

230 "A body and a spirit," he repeated. "The body, lady, is like a house: it don't go anywhere; but the spirit, lady, is like a automobile: always on the move, always . . ."

"Listen, Mr. Shiftlet," she said, "my well never goes dry and my house is always warm in the winter and there's no mortgage on a thing about this place. You can go to the courthouse and see for yourself. And yonder under that shed is a fine automobile." She laid the bait carefully. "You can have it painted by Saturday. I'll pay for the paint."

In the darkness, Mr. Shiftlet's smile stretched like a weary snake waking up by a fire. After a second he recalled himself and said, "I'm only saying a man's spirit means more to him than anything else. I would have to take my wife off for the week end
240 without no regards at all for cost. I got to follow where my spirit says to go."

"I'll give you fifteen dollars for a week end trip," the old woman said in a crabbed voice. "That's the best I can do."

"That wouldn't hardly pay for more than the gas and the hotel," he said. "It wouldn't feed her."

"Seventeen-fifty," the old woman said. "That's all I got so it isn't any use you trying to milk me. You can take a lunch."

Mr. Shiftlet was deeply hurt by the word "milk." He didn't doubt that she had more money sewed up in her mattress but he had already told her he was not interested in her money. "I'll make that do," he said and rose and walked off
250 without treating⁴ with her further. **G**

On Saturday the three of them drove into town in the car that the paint had barely dried on and Mr. Shiftlet and Lucynell were married in the Ordinary's⁵ office while the old woman witnessed. As they came out of the courthouse, Mr. Shiftlet began twisting his neck in his collar. He looked morose and bitter as if he had been insulted while someone held him. "That didn't satisfy me none," he said. "That was just something a woman in an office did, nothing but paper work and blood tests. What do they know about my blood? If they was to take my heart and cut it out," he said, "they wouldn't know a thing about me. It didn't satisfy me at all."

"It satisfied the law," the old woman said sharply.

260 "The law," Mr. Shiftlet said and spit. "It's the law that don't satisfy me."

He had painted the car dark green with a yellow band around it just under the windows. The three of them climbed in the front seat and the old woman said, "Don't Lucynell look pretty? Looks like a baby doll." Lucynell was dressed up in a white dress that her mother had uprooted from a trunk and there was a Panama

4. **treating**: discussing terms; negotiating.

5. **Ordinary's**: judge's.

G ANALYZE DETAILS

At this point in the story, what **conclusions** can you draw about each character? Cite details in lines 178–250 that influenced your judgments.

hat on her head with a bunch of red wooden cherries on the brim. Every now and then her placid expression was changed by a sly isolated little thought like a shoot of green in the desert. "You got a prize!" the old woman said.

Mr. Shiftlet didn't even look at her.

They drove back to the house to let the old woman off and pick up the lunch.
270 When they were ready to leave, she stood staring in the window of the car, with her fingers clenched around the glass. Tears began to seep sideways out of her eyes and run along the dirty creases in her face. "I ain't ever been parted with her for two days before," she said.

Mr. Shiftlet started the motor.

"And I wouldn't let no man have her but you because I seen you would do right. Good bye, Sugarbaby," she said, clutching at the sleeve of the white dress. Lucynell looked straight at her and didn't seem to see her there at all. Mr. Shiftlet eased the car forward so that she had to move her hands.

The early afternoon was clear and open and surrounded by pale blue sky.
280 Although the car would go only thirty miles an hour, Mr. Shiftlet imagined a terrific climb and dip and swerve that went entirely to his head so that he forgot his morning bitterness. He had always wanted an automobile but he had never been able to afford one before. He drove very fast because he wanted to make Mobile⁶ by nightfall.

Occasionally he stopped his thoughts long enough to look at Lucynell in the seat beside him. She had eaten the lunch as soon as they were out of the yard and now she was pulling the cherries off the hat one by one and throwing them out the window. He became depressed in spite of the car. He had driven about a hundred miles when he decided that she must be hungry again and at the next
290 small town they came to, he stopped in front of an aluminum-painted eating place called The Hot Spot and took her in and ordered her a plate of ham and grits. The ride had made her sleepy and as soon as she got up on the stool, she rested her head on the counter and shut her eyes. There was no one in The Hot Spot but Mr. Shiftlet and the boy behind the counter, a pale youth with a greasy rag hung over his shoulder. Before he could dish up the food, she was snoring gently. **H**

"Give it to her when she wakes up," Mr. Shiftlet said. "I'll pay for it now."

The boy bent over her and stared at the long pink-gold hair and the half-shut sleeping eyes. Then he looked up and stared at Mr. Shiftlet. "She looks like an angel of Gawd," he murmured.

300 "Hitch-hiker," Mr. Shiftlet explained. "I can't wait. I got to make Tuscaloosa."⁷

The boy bent over again and very carefully touched his finger to a strand of the golden hair, and Mr. Shiftlet left.

He was more depressed than ever as he drove on by himself. The late afternoon had grown hot and sultry and the country had flattened out. Deep in the sky a storm was preparing very slowly and without thunder as if it meant to drain every drop of air from the earth before it broke. There were times when Mr. Shiftlet

6. **Mobile**: a city in southwestern Alabama, along the Gulf Coast.

7. **Tuscaloosa**: a city in west-central Alabama.

H IRONY

Consider what most people would expect from an establishment called The Hot Spot. What is ironic about this restaurant's name?

preferred not to be alone. He felt too that a man with a car had a responsibility to others, and he kept his eye out for a hitch-hiker. Occasionally he saw a sign that warned: "Drive carefully. The life you save may be your own." ❶

310 The narrow road dropped off on either side into dry fields and here and there a shack or a filling station stood in a clearing. The sun began to set directly in front of the automobile. It was a reddening ball that through his windshield was slightly flat on the bottom and top. He saw a boy in overalls and a gray hat standing on the edge of the road and he slowed the car down and stopped in front of him. The boy didn't have his hand raised to thumb the ride, he was only standing there, but he had a small cardboard suitcase and his hat was set on his head in a way to indicate that he had left somewhere for good. "Son," Mr. Shiftlet said, "I see you want a ride."

The boy didn't say he did or he didn't but he opened the door of the car and
320 got in, and Mr. Shiftlet started driving again. The child held the suitcase on his lap and folded his arms on top of it. He turned his head and looked out the window away from Mr. Shiftlet. Mr. Shiftlet felt oppressed. "Son," he said after a minute, "I got the best old mother in the world so I reckon you only got the second best."

The boy gave him a quick dark glance and then turned his face back out the window.

"It's nothing so sweet," Mr. Shiftlet continued, "as a boy's mother. She taught him his first prayers at her knee, she give him love when no other would, she told him what was right and what wasn't, and she seen that he done the right thing. Son," he said, "I never rued a day in my life like the one I rued when I left that
330 old mother of mine."

The boy shifted in his seat but he didn't look at Mr. Shiftlet. He unfolded his arms and put one hand on the door handle.

"My mother was a angel of Gawd," Mr. Shiftlet said in a very strained voice. "He took her from heaven and giver to me and I left her." His eyes were instantly clouded over with a mist of tears. The car was barely moving.

The boy turned angrily in the seat. "You go to the devil!" he cried. "My old woman is a flea bag and yours is a stinking pole cat!" and with that he flung the door open and jumped out with his suitcase into the ditch.

Mr. Shiftlet was so shocked that for about a hundred feet he drove along slowly
340 with the door still open. A cloud, the exact color of the boy's hat and shaped like a turnip, had descended over the sun, and another, worse looking, crouched behind the car. Mr. Shiftlet felt that the rottenness of the world was about to engulf him. He raised his arm and let it fall again to his breast. "Oh Lord!" he prayed. "Break forth and wash the slime from this earth!"

The turnip continued slowly to descend. After a few minutes there was a guffawing peal of thunder from behind and fantastic raindrops, like tin-can tops, crashed over the rear of Mr. Shiftlet's car. Very quickly he stepped on the gas, and with his stump sticking out the window he raced the galloping shower into Mobile. ☹

❶ IRONY

What is the irony in Shiftlet's reasons for looking for a hitchhiker?



SUNSHINE STATE STANDARD
Literary Analysis
Benchmark LA.1112.2.1.7 Analyze, interpret, and evaluate an author's use of descriptive language (e.g., irony)....

Comprehension

- 1. Recall** What are Lucynell's disabilities?
- 2. Recall** When they first meet, what do Mr. Shiftlet and Mrs. Crater want from each other?
- 3. Summarize** What is the bargain struck between Mr. Shiftlet and Mrs. Crater over her daughter, Lucynell?
- 4. Clarify** What does Mr. Shiftlet's treatment of Lucynell at the end reveal about his intentions all along?

Literary Analysis

- 5. Analyze Character** Explain why Mr. Shiftlet is able to get what he wants from Mrs. Crater. What traits make him a good con artist? What makes Mrs. Crater the perfect victim for this kind of **deception**? Cite evidence to support your response.
- 6. Analyze Descriptive Details** Review the chart you created as you read. Because Mr. Shiftlet and Mrs. Crater are both hiding something during much of the story, readers must mine the details given about each character for clues to their true selves. Since Mr. Shiftlet's words and thoughts can't be trusted, what can you learn about him from the descriptions of his physical appearance? What details reveal the flaws in Mrs. Crater's character and give her motives away? Support your analysis with evidence from the text.
- 7. Interpret Irony** In this story, much of O'Connor's wry humor comes from **situational** and **dramatic irony**. Review the story to find at least two examples of each kind of irony. Also, see whether you can find one example that reveals both kinds at once. What do these multiple ironies suggest about O'Connor's view of her fellow human beings?
- 8. Make Judgments** What is the significance of the story's title, taken from a road sign? Explain how you think O'Connor judges Tom T. Shiftlet, as well as how you yourself do. Be sure to address the following:
 - the way in which Mr. Shiftlet is a potential savior of his own life and the lives of others
 - how and why he fails in this role
 - whether you think he has any redeeming features or see him as hopelessly lost

Literary Criticism

- 9. Author's Style** For Flannery O'Connor, a devout Catholic, evidence of divine grace was everywhere, and her stories are full of religious **imagery**. Find at least two examples of religious imagery in this story and explain what they contribute to its meaning and its message.