

# The Life You Save May Be Your Own



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF FLANNERY O'CONNOR

Flannery O'Connor was born in 1925 in Savannah, Georgia, to Catholic parents. When she was 15, her family moved to Milledgeville, Georgia, and her father died of lupus a year later. She attended Georgia State College for Women and then, in 1946, the prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop, where she got to know other major figures in Southern literature such as Robert Penn Warren and Andrew Lytle. She published her first book, the novel *Wise Blood*, in 1952. That same year, she was diagnosed with lupus and returned to the family farm in Milledgeville, where she wrote, attended Mass, raised peacocks, and maintained a wide correspondence, including with writers like Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell. *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, her first short story collection, was published in 1955. Her second novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*, followed in 1960. She died in 1964 of complications from lupus. Her last two short story collections, [Everything That Rises Must Converge](#) (1965) and *The Complete Stories* (1971), were published posthumously, with the latter winning the 1972 National Book Award for Fiction.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

O'Connor was active between 1945 and 1964, or from approximately the end of World War II to the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. This was a transformational period for America, politically, socially, and economically. The post-WWII economic boom was largely fueled by the manufacturing industry, which built on earlier models of assembly line labor to create a robust middle class. However, many groups—African Americans, women, rural Americans living far from industrial centers—were left out of the boom. Additionally, people with disabilities had few legal protections. Disabled children were not guaranteed the right to public education until 1975. The Americans with Disabilities Act, which outlawed discrimination based on ability and required public spaces to be accessible, was only passed in 1990. In the mid-20th century, it was not uncommon for children with developmental disabilities to be institutionalized from a young age. These institutions—also called asylums—often had harsh or unsanitary living conditions, and many families would choose not to publicly acknowledge their disabled relative.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Flannery O'Connor is best known as a writer of the Southern Gothic, a regional genre that emerged in the 20th century out

of earlier gothic literature, dark romanticism, and Southern humor like Mark Twain's [Adventures of Huckleberry Finn](#). Carson McCullers' 1940 novel *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* is another example of the Southern Gothic that deals with disabled, deaf-mute characters. William Faulkner's [As I Lay Dying](#) (1930) and [Light in August](#) (1932) are also major works in Southern literature. O'Connor was a great admirer of Faulkner, once saying that "the presence alone of Faulkner in our midst makes a great difference in what the writer can and cannot permit himself to do. Nobody wants his mule and wagon stalled on the same track the Dixie Limited is roaring down." O'Connor also knew prominent members of the Southern Agrarian movement, including its de facto leader Robert Penn Warren, who won the Pulitzer Prize in 1947 for his novel *All The King's Men*. O'Connor was also heavily influenced by Catholic thought, especially Thomas Aquinas.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Life You Save May Be Your Own
- **When Written:** 1955
- **Where Written:** Milledgeville, Georgia
- **When Published:** 1955, in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, and later in *The Complete Stories* in 1971
- **Literary Period:** Southern Gothic, Christian Realism, Contemporary Literature
- **Genre:** Short story, Southern Gothic
- **Setting:** A remote farm in the South
- **Climax:** Shiftlet abandons Lucynell at a roadside diner
- **Antagonist:** Shiftlet is both the protagonist and the story's most villainous figure, struggling ineffectually against his own sinful nature
- **Point of View:** Third person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Child star.** Flannery O'Connor had her first brush with fame at age six, when Pathé News, a major newsreel company, filmed her with her trained chicken.

**Cartoon origins.** In college, O'Connor was active as a cartoonist, drawing dozens of humorous comics for the school newspaper. She even submitted some of her cartoon work to magazines like *The New Yorker*, and critics have argued that these early works preface some of the themes of her later writing.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Tom Shiftlet, a one-armed carpenter and drifter, walks up the road towards a remote farm. When he arrives, he meets the owners: a mother and daughter who are both named Lucynell Crater. The mother, Mrs. Crater, is old and toothless; the daughter, Lucynell, is deaf, mute, and seems much younger than her age of nearly 30. Shiftlet raises his arms into the shape of a “crooked cross,” remarks on the beauty of the setting sun, and then fixates on an **automobile** on the property, which Mrs. Crater explains hasn’t run in 15 years.

Mrs. Crater and Shiftlet talk for a while, agreeing that the world is a mostly rotten place. Shiftlet also describes his past work and travels, although he also points out that he might be lying about everything he says. Mrs. Crater offers him food and shelter in exchange for work.

Shiftlet agrees, and he quickly starts fixing up broken things around the farm. He also befriends Lucynell, teaching her to say her first word, “bird.” Although Mrs. Crater at first doubts Shiftlet’s ability to work because of his missing arm, once he demonstrates that he can fix things, she begins scheming to get him to marry Lucynell. Mrs. Crater’s husband has been dead for 15 years, and she longs for a son-in-law to help her on the farm.

Mrs. Crater points out how sweet and innocent Lucynell is, even lying that she’s around 16 to make her seem more attractive. Finally, Shiftlet is able to get the broken car running, with “an expression of serious modesty on his face as if he had just raised the dead.” He later agrees to marry Lucynell at Mrs. Crater’s urging, but only after she agrees to give him money to take Lucynell on a honeymoon.

Shiftlet and Lucynell marry at a courthouse and drive off on their honeymoon. Mrs. Crater says goodbye to her daughter, who she’s never been separated from before, but she expects to see her again in a few days. Shiftlet’s true destination, though, is Mobile. They drive for almost a hundred miles before he stops at a roadside restaurant, buys Lucynell a meal, and abandons her while she naps.

As he continues to drive on alone, he feels a sudden obligation to help others, so he decides to offer a ride to a boy standing on the side of the road. Shiftlet tells the hitchhiker about his mother and how much he regrets leaving her, but the boy jumps out of the car in alarm. In this moment, Shiftlet seems to have a reckoning. His car slows to a crawl, as though he might be considering going back, and he cries out to God to “Break forth and wash the slime from this earth!” There’s a rainstorm gathering overhead, but instead of turning back, he steps on the gas towards Mobile, trying to outrun the storm.



## CHARACTERS

## MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Tom Shiftlet** – Tom Shiftlet, the 28 year old protagonist of the story, is a one-armed traveling carpenter. He claims to be from Tarwater, Tennessee, and to have served in the military, traveled abroad, and worked various different jobs, although he also points out that he could be lying about any of this. This means that readers, like the story’s other characters, aren’t sure about his real identity. When Shiftlet first arrives at the Crater family’s farm, Mrs. Crater offers to let him stay at the farm and work in exchange for food and shelter. Shiftlet agrees to this, but he seems a bit shady, as he dodges many of her questions or provides cryptic, unrelated answers. But Shiftlet does start fixing up broken things around the farm, and he also befriends Mrs. Crater’s daughter, Lucynell, who is deaf and mute. He’s surprisingly tender with her, even teaching her to say her first word, “bird.” Finally, Shiftlet is able to miraculously get the family’s broken **car** running—a car that he’s been fixated on since the moment he arrived at the farm, seemingly because he’s scheming to take it for himself. At Mrs. Crater’s urging, Shiftlet agrees to marry Lucynell—but only after she promises him money to take Lucynell on a honeymoon. When they marry at a courthouse, they immediately drive off on their honeymoon. Quickly, Shiftlet abandons Lucynell at a roadside restaurant and continues on alone with the car. Throughout the story, Shiftlet has been something of a sinister Christ figure—his outstretched arms form a “crooked cross” and he seems torn between virtue (kindness to Lucynell, fixing broken things on the farm) and sin (lying and manipulation, leaving Lucynell at the restaurant). In the car, at the end of the story, Shiftlet almost has a reckoning, feeling a sudden obligation to help others and a desire for God to wash the whole world clean. While he seems to contemplate turning back towards Lucynell, he eventually chooses to drive onward, refusing the grace from God that he prayed for as he tries to outrun a gathering **storm**.

**Mrs. Crater** – Lucynell Crater is an old widow who lives on a remote farm with her disabled daughter (who is also named Lucynell Crater). Mrs. Crater is described as toothless and tiny, “about the size of a cedar fence post.” Her husband died fifteen years before the story begins, and she wants a son-in-law to stay and help around the farm. But she also loves her daughter very much and says numerous times that she wouldn’t give her up for anything, which puts her desire for a son-in-law in conflict with her desire to protect her daughter. While Mrs. Crater initially doubts that Tom Shiftlet is capable of working on her farm (due to his missing arm), she invites him to stay and eat in exchange for his labor. Once he demonstrates that he can fix things and shows his bond with Lucynell, Mrs. Crater begins scheming to get them to marry. She points out how sweet and innocent Lucynell is, even lying that she’s around 16 to make her seem more attractive. Mrs. Crater is so desperate for a son-

in-law that she agrees to give Shiftlet money and access to the fixed-up **car** to take Lucynell on a honeymoon, even though she's always said she would never let a man take Lucynell away. By the end, she's gotten what she wanted (a son-in-law), but Shiftlet leaves Lucynell at a roadside diner, and it's unclear how she will find her way home. In this way, Mrs. Crater's selfishness and disregard for protecting her daughter may cost her the most important person in her life.

**Lucynell Crater** – Lucynell lives with her mother, Mrs. Crater, on a remote farm in the south. She is deaf, mute, and has mental disabilities, but she is able to do work around the farm like sweeping and feeding the chickens. Lucynell is in her late twenties, although she seems younger. She's described as looking like an angel or a baby doll, with pink-gold hair and very blue eyes. Lucynell is excited when Shiftlet arrives at the farm. She enjoys following him around as he works, and he teaches her to say the word "bird" for the first time. Eventually, her mother arranges for her to marry Shiftlet, though it seems unlikely that she understands or consents to this arrangement. Shiftlet then takes her on a road trip, supposedly a honeymoon, but ultimately abandons her as she's sleeping in a roadside restaurant. Throughout the story, Lucynell is associated with innocence and holiness, and when Shiftlet abandons her, he is also abandoning God and virtue.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Waiter at the Hot Spot** – The waiter is a young man who works at the roadside restaurant where Shiftlet abandons Lucynell. The waiter describes Lucynell as looking like an "angel of Gawd" and gently touches her hair.

**Hitchhiker** – The hitchhiker is a young man to whom Shiftlet offers a ride after abandoning Lucynell. He sullenly listens to Shiftlet's reminiscing about his mother, before exclaiming "My old woman is a flea bag and yours is a stinking pole cat!" and jumping out of the moving car.

Lucynell, offers him an opportunity for redemption: he could stay with the family, marry Lucynell, and live a purposeful life in a place associated with virtue and holiness. Still, he ultimately chooses evil when he abandons Lucynell at a restaurant and takes off with the fixed-up **car**. Throughout the story, grace and redemption are always available to Shiftlet, but his choice to reject virtue shows that it's up to each person to decide whether or not they'll be redeemed.

From the beginning, the story associates the Crater home with redemption and suggests that, if Shiftlet were to stay there permanently, he would receive God's grace. For instance, the dazzling sunset as Shiftlet first approaches the farm inspires him to raise his arms to the sky in the shape of a cross, which suggests that the sunset brings him closer to God. (Christianity holds that Jesus's sacrificial death on the cross—itsself an act of God's grace—redeemed humankind.) And since the sunset is visible at the Craters' every night, staying there in the presence of God seems like a virtuous choice. Furthermore, the farm provides Shiftlet with valuable work to do, work that aligns him with Christ. He's doing carpentry, just like Christ did, and fixing everything that's broken on the farm resembles Christ's work of resurrecting the dead. Lastly, Lucynell herself is the story's embodiment of holiness. Lucynell is innocent, sweet, and she literally resembles an angel; she's fair-haired with blue eyes (as angels have often been depicted in Western art), and the waiter at the restaurant describes her explicitly as an "angel of Gawd." Lucynell clearly has affection for Shiftlet and flourishes with his companionship, such as when he teaches her to say "bird" for the first time. Shiftlet's opportunity to be her companion is a chance at grace—he could stay on the farm doing his Christlike labor and watching the holy sunsets alongside his angelic bride.

Despite his fixation on stealing the car, Shiftlet does seem drawn to staying at the Crater household and being redeemed. For example, when he remarks that he'd like to "see the sun go down every evening like God made it to do," he's simultaneously appreciating the beauty of the farm and demonstrating his desire to live a virtuous life. In addition, his work for the Craters seems to satisfy him; he tells Mrs. Crater how he's able to fix up the farm because he has a "personal interest in it." This is certainly a veiled reference to his plan to steal the car, but it also seems like a backhanded confession that he actually likes living there. Finally, he develops a special connection with Lucynell, showing that it's possible for him to grow closer to God. During his time on the farm, they seem inseparable—she follows him around while he works, he's tender with her (helping her up when she falls, for instance), and he's even able to teach her to speak for the first time. All of this shows that Shiftlet is faced with a choice: he can either give into temptation and steal the car, or he can choose redemptive life in front of him.

When Shiftlet steals the car, he's given a final opportunity for redemption: his emotional crisis as he drives through the



## THEMES

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



### FREE WILL AND REDEMPTION

In "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," drifter Tom Shiftlet arrives at Mrs. Crater's farm offering work in exchange for food and lodging. Shiftlet quickly gains Mrs. Crater's trust, but he has evil intentions: he's scheming to fix up the family's car and take it for himself. Shiftlet's time with Mrs. Crater and her disabled daughter,

storm. In this moment, Shiftlet has already chosen evil; he has abandoned Lucynell at a restaurant and driven away with the family car, clearly not intending to return. But his conscience pains him, showing that he's still not irredeemable, even after everything he's done. For one, he reflects that "a man with a car ha[s] a responsibility to others," so he looks to pick up a hitchhiker as he drives. Since he's just told the waiter at the restaurant that Lucynell was a hitchhiker, his desire to help a hitchhiker now implies that that he wants to atone for what he did to her.

Furthermore, when he does pick up a hitchhiker, he gives the man an odd lecture about how good his mother was and how sad he was to have left her, crying all the while. Significantly, he describes his mother as an "angel of Gawd"—the exact language that the waiter used to describe Lucynell. This lecture has nothing to do with the hitchhiker's situation and seemingly nothing to do with Shiftlet's own mother (whom he's barely mentioned in the story), so it's plausible to think that he's really talking about Lucynell, expressing his remorse for leaving her at the restaurant. This remorse shows that Shiftlet is finally vulnerable to redemption—he's so upset over what he's done that he's weeping in front of a stranger, and he seems to be questioning his choice to drive away from the Craters, as his car is now "barely moving," suggesting that he might turn back.

This final crisis helps explain the meaning of the billboard that Shiftlet saw a few miles back: "Drive carefully. The life you save may be your own." It's his driving that's his path to salvation—if he turns the car around, then he'll save his soul. In this moment, feeling overwhelmed by "rotteness" and praying that God will "wash the slime from this earth," Shiftlet seems like he's about to make the virtuous choice. But he doesn't; he steps on the gas and races away. At no point in the story was Shiftlet irrevocably doomed to sin and damnation; he could always choose to redeem himself. And the story's ending suggests that maybe—despite choosing evil yet again—he still can.



### BROKENNESS AND REPAIR

"The Life You Save May Be Your Own" is full of broken objects and broken people. Tom Shiftlet, a drifting carpenter, fixes up a **broken car** on the

Crater farm. Mrs. Crater is missing her teeth, her daughter Lucynell is mentally disabled, and their farm is full of broken objects—even though it's also a respite from a broken, sinful world. Shiftlet himself is missing an arm, but it's his spirit that is truly broken. He's able to repair things on the farm without a problem, but he can't heal his spirit—as soon as he fixes the car, he deceives Mrs. Crater so he can steal it, abandoning Lucynell in the process. The story suggests that brokenness is a natural, inevitable state for humanity, but that humanity still has an obligation to repair things whenever we can.

From the beginning, the story is full of people and things that are depicted as flawed or broken. One of the first things

readers learn about Shiftlet is that he's missing an arm. Likewise, the story quickly reveals that Lucynell can't speak. Even the able-bodied Mrs. Crater is depicted as old and worn down—she can't chew the gum Shiftlet offers her because she has no teeth. Right away, imperfection is the default state of the characters. The clearest example of the brokenness motif, though, is the Craters' old car. The car hasn't run in 15 years, having died the same day Mrs. Crater's husband did. Not only is the car's brokenness tied to a sense of grief, it also literally keeps Mrs. Crater and Lucynell from moving on from their "desolate" farm. This state of brokenness seems to apply to the whole world, according to Shiftlet—the world is "almost rotten," most women these days are "trash," mass-produced cars break down easily. Modern, industrialized life is depicted as sinful and degraded.

In the face of this brokenness, the story suggests that the work of fixing things is not just helpful, but spiritual. Shiftlet's role as a traveling carpenter who agrees to fix things around the farm (the steps, the fence, etc.) creates a parallel with another traveling carpenter: Christ. The clearest example of this is in the story's framing of fixing the broken car as a miracle, "as if [Shiftlet] had just raised the dead." Christ also raised the dead, so this once again casts Shiftlet as a Christ figure. A third way in which the story associates Shiftlet with Christ is Shiftlet's role as a teacher (Christ himself taught through his ministry). Shiftlet is able to teach Lucynell to say the word "bird," the first time she's ever spoken, which is its own kind of miracle.

Eventually, though, it becomes clear that Shiftlet's Christlike good works aren't enough to fully redeem him—something remains broken in his spirit. Shiftlet chooses to steal the car he has so virtuously fixed up, abandoning Lucynell at a roadside diner in the process. His act of repairing the car therefore becomes a literal vehicle for his own selfishness and cruelty as he drives away. By the end, Shiftlet feels as though "the rotteness of the world [is] about to engulf him," a callback to his earlier assessment of the world as an almost rotten place. He asks God to "wash the slime from this earth" as a **rain** cloud approaches, but instead of being washed clean by the rain (like a baptism), he steps on the gas. The car, which he uses to race the shower, stops him from being cleansed and healed.

The world's inherent brokenness is never resolved in the story. Acts of repair are treated as virtuous and holy, but good works also seem intertwined with sin. The car embodies this tension, as Shiftlet's willingness and ability to fix it is Christlike, and yet once the car comes back to life, it enables Shiftlet's worst tendencies: he steals the car, abandons Lucynell, and steps on the gas to avoid his own conscience. In this way, good works alone are not an escape from sin—that would require conscience and integrity, a kind of brokenness that the story presents no way of fixing.



## GENDER AND DISABILITY

Throughout the story, Tom Shiftlet seems preoccupied with his own masculinity. He talks frequently about what defines a man, reflecting his insecurity that others might think his missing arm makes him less of one. Meanwhile, the characters treat Lucynell as though she were the perfect woman: she's physically beautiful and, because of her intellectual disability, she's docile and mostly silent. But in the end, Shiftlet's disability makes him no less powerful—he's a man with the capacity to not only fix things around the farm, but also to be profoundly cruel in pursuit of his own freedom. And while Lucynell's disability might have made her an "ideal woman," it also leaves her powerless to protect herself in a dire situation. In this way, the story satirizes traditional gender roles, showing how society's *real* ideal is a woman who can't defend herself against the strength of a man.

Shiftlet is preoccupied with what defines a man, which seems to stem from his insecurity about his missing arm. When Shiftlet asserts that he's a man, if not "a whole one," and that he can fix anything on the farm, it reveals the source of his anxiety about gender. Since he only has one arm, he worries that he might be—or that others might perceive him as—less of a man. Because of this, he overcompensates by insisting, over and over, on his masculinity. When he first shows up on the Craters' farm, for instance, he goes on a long tangent about what a man is, and what a man is made for. And when Mrs. Crater says she can't pay him to do work on the farm, he asks rhetorically if all a man is made for is money. Shiftlet's apparent worry that Mrs. Crater won't see him as a real man is well-founded; at first, Mrs. Crater doubts Shiftlet's ability to provide, wondering "if a one-armed man could put a new roof on her garden house." She later reminds him that the world is not kind to friendless, disabled drifters. Mrs. Crater does doubt his masculinity until he proves his ability to work, and she makes it obvious that others probably share her assumption.

While Shiftlet's disability seems to undermine his masculinity, the other characters treat Lucynell as a perfect example of womanhood. Lucynell is depicted as an angelic, divine figure, in large part because of her cherubic beauty. The story frequently refers to her pink-gold hair and peacock blue eyes, which prompt a waiter at a roadside restaurant to exclaim "She looks like an angel of Gawd." Physical beauty isn't the only way Lucynell is idealized. Mrs. Crater emphasizes Lucynell's feminine value in the very first scene, pointing out that she can perform domestic labor like sweeping, washing and cooking. This emphasis suggests that proficiency in household chores is one of the primary ways of determining whether a woman has value. Another of Lucynell's supposedly feminine characteristics is her innocence. Mrs. Crater repeatedly points towards Lucynell's innocence while trying to convince Shiftlet to marry her (Shiftlet had previously stated he was still unmarried because he wanted an innocent woman rather than

"trash"). Historically, female innocence meant virginity, and was required for a woman to be a desirable bride. In this case, though, innocence also seems synonymous with mental impairment and a lack of worldliness. Similarly, the story frames Lucynell's inability to talk as a virtuous quality in a wife, since she can't "sass" her husband. Both Mrs. Crater and Shiftlet seem to agree these are all desirable qualities in a woman.

But Lucynell's supposed womanly perfection contrasts with her childlike, infantilized, and inscrutable nature, suggesting the characters have a distorted view of female virtue. On Lucynell's wedding day, Mrs. Crater notes approvingly that she looks like a baby doll—an inanimate object rather than a real person. This comparison suggests that Lucynell's humanity isn't taken seriously even by her mother, especially since it's not clear that Lucynell has been able to consent to or even understands her marriage. Similarly, other characters' projections onto Lucynell are not always true. For example, her mother lies to Shiftlet that she's around 16 years old when in actuality she's closer to 30. In this case, she is treated as *more* of a child than she really is, but the deceit—and Shiftlet's acceptance of it—emphasizes that no one, not even the reader, can ever know the truth about Lucynell's inner nature. Finally, Lucynell, in addition to being deaf and largely mute, is often described as blank and unseeing. After her courthouse wedding to Shiftlet she has a placid, thoughtless expression. When Mrs. Crater says goodbye to her—for perhaps the first and last time, as Shiftlet will abandon her soon after—Lucynell doesn't "seem to see" her mother at all. Her apparent lack of an inner life suggests Flannery O'Connor is critiquing society's idea of what defines an ideal woman. If Lucynell is the perfect wife, then any woman who can speak or think for herself is deficient.

It's notable that Shiftlet's physical disability throws his manliness into question, but Lucynell's intellectual disability—which results in silence and sweetness—makes other characters see her as the perfect woman. This suggests that a "broken" man is unacceptable, while a "broken" woman is ideal. What's more frightening is that Shiftlet's disability doesn't really hold him back; his missing arm doesn't stop him from doing the masculine work of fixing things on the farm, and—though readers might expect him to feel empathy for another "broken" person—it doesn't stop him from abandoning Lucynell, either. Meanwhile, Lucynell's disability leaves her unable to defend herself at all against the cruelty of those around her. The story, then, seems to be emphasizing the horrific power dynamic of traditional gender roles: women are ideally powerless against the strength—and cruelty—that is valorized in men.



## DECEPTION AND UNKNOWABILITY

As in many of Flannery O'Connor's short stories, nothing is what it appears in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own." The most obvious example is

Shiftlet, who conceals his true nature and lies about his intentions, but Mrs. Crater also acts deceitfully—and is punished for it through the loss of her daughter. In addition to the characters' posturing and false appearances, the inherent unknowability of humanity is a frequent motif in their conversations. By the end, Shiftlet's deception has allowed him to achieve his goal of owning an **automobile**. He nevertheless seems unfulfilled, but he can't articulate why. This suggests that a person's "true nature," if it exists at all, will always remain unknowable—even to themselves.

Shiftlet's initial arrival at the Craters' farm emphasizes the unreliability of first impressions. Mrs. Crater's very first impression of Shiftlet is that he's "a tramp and no one to be afraid of." By the end of the story, when Shiftlet steals the family car and abandons Lucynell, it's clear that he *is* someone she should have been more worried about. The possibility of appearances being misleading is also raised in more subtle ways, like when Mrs. Crater lifts up her lip to reveal she has no teeth, or the gradual way the extent of Lucynell's disability becomes clear. Importantly, Shiftlet draws attention to the possibility that he might be lying about his identity as soon as he arrives at the Craters' farm, asking "how you know I ain't lying?" when he introduces himself. He quickly rattles off a list of possible other identities, including names and cities, suggesting that "Tom T. Shiftlet" could be another made-up name. But Mrs. Crater decides to trust him, even though she doesn't know anything about him.

Both Shiftlet and (to a lesser extent) Mrs. Crater use deception to get what they think they want. Mrs. Crater is so desperate for a son-in-law that she does anything she can to convince Shiftlet to marry Lucynell, including giving him money for a trip and lying about Lucynell's age to make her seem more attractive. Of course, Shiftlet's deception is greater: he wants to steal the fixed-up family car, and he agrees to marry Lucynell only to achieve that goal. He spins a tale about taking Lucynell on a honeymoon as a way of gaining access to the car and some money. However, he quickly abandons Lucynell and makes off with the automobile.

By the end, neither character has found fulfillment through their deceit. Mrs. Crater, by marrying off her daughter, has lost her—perhaps forever. The story doesn't show what becomes of Lucynell after Shiftlet abandons her, but readers do know that losing Lucynell has always been Mrs. Crater's biggest fear. Her susceptibility to Shiftlet's deceit, and her willingness to use deceit herself, have cost her everything. Meanwhile, Shiftlet appears to have gotten exactly what he wanted—access to a car—but he still seems to feel guilty and unfulfilled. He picks up a hitchhiker in a show of generosity and gets teary-eyed telling the boy about how much he regrets leaving his old mother. The language Shiftlet uses, and the emphasis on motherhood, suggests a connection to the separation between a mother (Mrs. Crater) and her child (Lucynell) that he has just caused.

Still, he's unable to articulate his own guilt, and the story ends with him seriously distressed, despite having achieved his goal. Throughout the story, Shiftlet has continually made references to how little anyone, including legal and scientific authorities, understands about human nature. In the opening scene, he tells an anecdote about a doctor in Atlanta who dissected and studied a human heart, concluding by saying "he don't know no more about it than you or me." This statement functions both as a rejection of authority, and as a stubborn assertion that a person's inner nature (often represented by the heart) is unknowable to anyone. Clearly, this is an important belief to Shiftlet: he delivers it without any prompting, and repeats the sentiment throughout the story, most notably after he marries Lucynell at the courthouse: "If they was to take my heart and cut it out," he says, "they wouldn't know a thing about me." By the end, this statement comes to feel like an encapsulation of the story: none of the characters seem to have truly understood each other, and Shiftlet's final line of dialogue—"Oh Lord! Break forth and wash the slime from this earth!"—shows that he doesn't understand his own actions. This suggests that if there's any such thing as a person's "true nature," perhaps God is the only one who can understand it.



## SYMBOLS

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



### THE CAR

The broken-down car symbolizes the choice Shiftlet must make between redemption and sin.

From the beginning, the car fascinates Shiftlet: he immediately notices the make and model, and as he talks to Mrs. Crater, he focuses on "the automobile bumper that glittered in the distance." The car entices him because he wants to steal it—he's never had his own car before and he's always wanted one—but it also provides him with an opportunity for salvation. As Shiftlet works to repair the car, he takes on an almost Christlike role: he's helping the family to live a better life by fixing what's broken on the farm, and the story explicitly compares Shiftlet fixing the car to "rais[ing] the dead" (which was one of the miracles that Christ performed). So Shiftlet could choose the virtuous route of staying on the farm and continuing to help the family—but the car also gives Shiftlet the means to betray them, as now that it's fixed, he can steal it for himself. In this way, the car embodies Shiftlet's choice between virtue and sin: as he speeds away after abandoning Lucynell, he can choose to turn the car around and rescue her (the virtuous path) or he can speed away from the farm forever (the sinful path). He chooses sin, but the choice was always his.



## THE RAIN

At the end of the story, after Shiftlet abandons Lucynell, a huge rainstorm gathers in the sky. The cleansing rain symbolizes God's grace, and when Shiftlet steps on the gas to outrun the storm, it shows that he has rejected that grace and chosen sin. Earlier that afternoon, when Shiftlet initially set out with Lucynell, the sky was blue and clear, which gave a sense that God was smiling on them—Shiftlet was doing what he was supposed to do by caring for Lucynell and driving her to their honeymoon. But as soon as he abandons her in the diner, the air becomes "hot and sultry" as a huge storm starts to form. This gathering storm seems to suggest God's imminent judgment of Shiftlet's behavior, which perhaps contributes to his suddenly remembering his "responsibility to others." Then, after Shiftlet inadvertently scares off a hitchhiker, he nearly has a moment of reckoning. He cries out to God to "Break forth and wash the slime from this earth!" In saying this, Shiftlet himself frames rain as a cleansing religious symbol, like the flood God sent to wash away wickedness in the Old Testament or the Christian ritual of baptism. For a moment, it seems that the rainstorm might help Shiftlet to mend his ways, perhaps by pushing him to return to Lucynell. (His **car**, after all, has slowed almost to a stop, suggesting that he's having second thoughts.) However, at the end of the story, Shiftlet chooses to step on the gas and "[race] the galloping shower into Mobile," trying to outrun the rain rather than staying to receive the grace he has asked for.

## Explanation and Analysis

Tom Shiftlet has just arrived at the Craters' farm when this moment takes place. He hasn't yet said anything, not even in response to Mrs. Crater's polite "Good evening"—instead, he turns away from her to face the sunset and sticks his arms out like a cross. The silence foreshadows Shiftlet's distant and inscrutable nature, even though he quickly becomes chatty and friendly.

This moment also introduces several important themes and character traits. The imagery draws attention to Shiftlet's "whole" and "short" arms, emphasizing his disability, which is an important part of his characterization and will impact how Mrs. Crater initially perceives him. More importantly, though, the description of his figure forming a "crooked cross" introduces the religious and moral dimensions of the story. By comparing Shiftlet to a cross, the passage foreshadows his position as a Christlike figure. However, the cross is "crooked"—a neutral function of his physique, but also an indication that he may not be as holy as he appears. The sun also evokes divinity and power, and Shiftlet's choice to face it suggests he is looking for some kind of grace.

This line also tells the reader a lot about Mrs. Crater and Lucynell. Mrs. Crater acts "as if she were the owner of the sun," which suggests that she is presumptuous and entitled—traits that will resurface later in the story when she pushes Shiftlet to marry Lucynell. Meanwhile, Lucynell is introduced as a tragicomic figure: her "fat helpless hands" emphasize her essential vulnerability.



## QUOTES

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

### The Life You Save May Be Your Own Quotes

●● 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 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.

**Related Characters:** Lucynell Crater, Mrs. Crater, Tom Shiftlet

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 146

●● 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 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.

**Related Characters:** Mrs. Crater, Tom Shiftlet (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 146

### Explanation and Analysis

This moment is significant because it introduces the Craters' automobile, which will become a major focus and symbol within the story. Shiftlet's "pale sharp glance" lands on it quickly, having "already passed over" the rest of the scene. This language, the word "sharp" especially, suggests a subtle note of danger in Shiftlet's gaze. He is drawn to the car, and his eyes will continuously return to it throughout the story.

His apparently casual inquiry leads to a thematically important discovery: the car isn't just broken, it's dead. It died the same day as Mrs. Crater's husband, a detail that adds a dash of mysticism to the realist world of the story and emphasizes the car's position as a remnant of the Craters' grief and isolation. Since the car is tied to the deceased patriarch of the farm, Shiftlet's interest in it foreshadows the masculine caretaker role he begins to embody later in the story.

This brief exchange also introduces the recurring theme of an "almost rotten" world. The moral decay of modern, industrialized life is one of Shiftlet's favorite talking points throughout the story. It also introduces a crucial aspect of Shiftlet and Mrs. Crater's dynamic: whatever he says about the world, she's likely to agree with him. Her relative naivety and deference to him will have major implications later on.

☝ "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 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."

**Related Characters:** Tom Shiftlet (speaker), Mrs. Crater

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 147

### Explanation and Analysis

Tom Shiftlet, readers quickly learn, is a man of long-winded non sequiturs. This speech comes as an irrelevant response

to Mrs. Crater's question, "What you doing around here, Mr. Shiftlet?" and demonstrates Shiftlet's fondness for philosophizing. But while there is a dash of humor around Shiftlet's self-importance and Mrs. Crater's indulgence of it, this speech is rendered with a dramatic rhythm and attention to detail that brings real significance to its central theme: the unknowability of human nature.

The heart has long been a metaphorical stand-in for love, desire, and the most mysterious parts of human nature. Shiftlet describes a doctor's scientific examination of a heart in language that emphasizes the physicality and degradation of such an act: the doctor "held it in his hand," and dissected it "like it was a day-old chicken," a comparison that seems to reject any romantic ideas about what the heart means. But then, after a "significant pause" in which his eyes "brightened," Shiftlet flips this notion on its head: the pretentious doctor in Atlanta "don't know no more about it than you or me." The heart remains mysterious, even after being unceremoniously dissected.

☝ "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."

**Related Characters:** Tom Shiftlet, Mrs. Crater (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 149

### Explanation and Analysis

This exchange comes towards the end of the first scene, right after Shiftlet has said he wished he could live in a place "like this." Mrs. Crater's question is the first clue to her motivation as a character: she wants a son-in-law to stay and run the farm, and she's wondering if Shiftlet might be a suitable candidate.

Shiftlet's long silence points towards his reserve: he's happy to volunteer information, but he's reluctant to answer a direct question. The answer he does give, though, is revealing: he wants an "innocent" woman, a word that in this context implies virginal. But "innocent" can also be a noun referring to a victim, as in the biblical Massacre of the Innocents that King Herod ordered. Both meanings apply to Lucynell: she's a virgin, sure, but she also becomes something of a sacrificial lamb when Shiftlet abandons her at the diner. Shiftlet distinguishes between an innocent



woman and “this trash I could just pick up,” clearly drawing a gendered dichotomy between virginal, marriable women and sexually active “trash.” This emphasis on female gender roles leads to tragedy later in the story.

●● 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 ddbirrrtdtdt,” and clapping her hands. The old woman watched from a distance, secretly pleased. She was ravenous for a son-in-law.

**Related Characters:** Lucynell Crater (speaker), Mrs. Crater, Tom Shiftlet

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 150

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage marks a shift from the real-time dialogue of the opening scene to a more condensed timeline, emphasizing Shiftlet’s progress as a handyman and rapid transformation into a crucial member of the Craters’ small household. His carpentry work—especially fixing the broken steps and fence—subtly aligns him with Jesus, who was also a carpenter. That connection will be explored more explicitly later on in the story.


Shiftlet’s role as a teacher to Lucynell also suggests a Christ parallel as well as an almost paternal relationship between the two characters. This passage is the first explicit description of Lucynell’s disability, and knowing that she is both deaf and mute clarifies her characterization to the reader. The word he teaches her to say, “bird,” is also significant: not only are birds a frequent motif in Flannery O’Connor’s writing, stemming from her own lifelong love of the animals, they also have a religious significance. For example, in the Book of Genesis in the Bible, Noah sends a dove out after the great flood, and its safe return with an olive branch represents hope for a new and less sinful world. Lucynell’s association with birds (she is elsewhere described as having “peacock-blue” eyes) emphasizes her position as a symbol of holiness and virtue.


Lastly, this passage explicitly introduces Mrs. Crater’s “ravenous” desire for a son-in-law. That word choice suggests a violent, greedy hunger, perhaps strong enough to cloud her judgment. Her placement at “a distance” from

the main scene, and the secrecy of her pleasure, suggest manipulative, behind-the-scenes actions.

●● 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.

**Related Characters:** Tom Shiftlet

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 151

### Explanation and Analysis

Shiftlet’s resurrection of the broken car is the most significant of the minor miracles he performs around the Craters’ farm. Unlike his previous good works, which were listed in rapid succession, this one gets its own dramatic scene. The “volley of blasts” that accompanies the car’s “fierce and stately” appearance emphasize the dynamic, explosive, and impressive nature of this accomplishment. Shiftlet’s “very erect” posture suggests pride, even though his facial expression is one of “serious modesty.”

There’s some irony to the description of Shiftlet’s modesty making him look “as if he had just raised the dead.” One might expect the natural response to performing a miracle to be something more like shock or pride, and Shiftlet’s modesty thus reads as carefully composed and even disingenuous. His reaction doesn’t match his achievement, in other words, and that subtly points to his untrustworthiness.

At the same time, this sentence is the most explicit language connecting Shiftlet with Jesus. Raising the dead was Christ’s greatest miracle, and for Shiftlet to metaphorically do the same emphasizes the extent to which staying at the Craters’ farm has allowed him to do meaningful, virtuous work and grow closer to God. This language also personifies the car, strengthening its relationship to the deceased Mr. Crater. So while there is an element of falseness in Shiftlet’s reaction, this passage mostly serves as the peak of his virtue and good works.

“Listen here, Mr. Shiftlet,” she said, sliding forward in her chair, “you’d be getting a 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.

“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...”

**Related Characters:** Tom Shiftlet (speaker), Mrs. Crater

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 152

### Explanation and Analysis

This scene occurs in the evening after Shiftlet has fixed the Craters’ car. Mrs. Crater has finally told Shiftlet that he should marry Lucynell; Shiftlet has demurred, claiming that he can’t get married since he has no money to treat his wife with. Mrs. Crater’s angry response—that there’s no place in the world for a “poor disabled friendless man”—is the most direct confrontation between the two main characters. Mrs. Crater has previously been deferential to Shiftlet, agreeing with his observations about human nature and the state of the world, but this exchange flips that dynamic.

Mrs. Crater’s words are particularly cutting because Shiftlet is insecure about his disability, something that became clear in the very first scene. The impact of her words is intensified by the vivid simile O’Connor uses, settling “like a group of buzzards” in Shiftlet’s mind. The recurring bird motif becomes threatening and ugly in this exchange.

Shiftlet’s response is characteristically abstract. Though the words have clearly hurt him, he doesn’t let on, and answers with an “even voice.” His speech here, about a man being made up of body and spirit, recalls his speech in the first scene asking what a man is. He compares the body to a house and the spirit to an automobile, language that ties his own soul to the car he’s just fixed. This makes it clear how deep his fixation on the Craters’ automobile really is. He seems to be threatening Mrs. Crater with his spirit’s restlessness: by saying that his spirit is “always on the move, always,” he implies that he could pack up and leave

tomorrow. She wants a son-in-law too badly to let that happen.

“In the darkness, Mr. Shiftlet’s smile stretched like a weary snake waking up by a fire.”

**Related Characters:** Tom Shiftlet

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 152

### Explanation and Analysis

This short line is one of the most significant uses of figurative language in the entire story. It comes directly in response to Mrs. Crater laying the “bait” by saying she’ll pay to have the automobile painted if Shiftlet marries Lucynell.

Up until now, there have only been subtle hints that Shiftlet may not be as virtuous, honest, or Christlike as he appears to be. The simile here, comparing Shiftlet’s smile to a “weary snake” in the darkness, carries an ominous and frightening tone. Just like a bird is usually a symbol of hope in the Christian tradition, a snake is almost always a symbol of evil. Satan took the form of a serpent in the Garden of Eden to tempt Adam and Eve towards evil, and the idea of temptation is just as relevant to this particular image as the idea of evil is—Shiftlet has always been tempted by the promise of the Craters’ automobile, but this is the moment when he seems to fully succumb to that temptation. That the snake of his smile is “waking up” suggests this is a return to a previous state, one that has perhaps lain dormant as he’s performed virtuous acts at the Craters’ farm.



The line immediately after this one is also important: “After a second he recalled himself,” suggesting that this snakelike smile has revealed something Shiftlet would rather keep hidden. Again, this draws attention to Shiftlet’s duplicity, and aligns him more closely with Satan’s shapeshifting than with Christ’s miracles.

“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.

“Hitchhiker,” Mr. Shiftlet explained. “I can’t wait. I got to make Tuscaloosa.”

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

**Related Characters:** Tom Shiftlet, Waiter at the Hot Spot (speaker), Lucynell Crater

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 154

### Explanation and Analysis

This scene takes place after the wedding, when Shiftlet and Lucynell are driving off on what Mrs. Crater thinks is their honeymoon. Shiftlet, however, has already decided to drive on towards Mobile. He stops at a roadside diner when he thinks Lucynell must be hungry, and she promptly falls asleep.


The waiter's exclamation that Lucynell "looks like an angel of Gawd" is a very thematically important line: it's the clearest and most explicit association between Lucynell and divinity. She represents holiness, and the waiter is awed by her. His moment of reverence for her "long pink-gold hair" and angelic aura contrasts with Shiftlet's hasty, self-serving lies. While it's already clear that Shiftlet's true destination is not a weekend hotel but a distant city, the moment that Shiftlet describes Lucynell—his lawfully wedded wife—as a hitchhiker makes it clear how unforgivable his deception is. He isn't just stealing the family car; he's abandoning a disabled woman, to whom he is legally bound, in the middle of nowhere. The ease with which he casts aside an "angel of Gawd" emphasizes how far from salvation he has fallen. Note, also, that he lies about his destination, claiming to be headed towards Tuscaloosa rather than Mobile—he doesn't want to be found.

The last sentence of this passage is carefully constructed to emphasize Shiftlet's callousness. As the waiter "very carefully" touches his finger "to a strand of the golden hair," it's unclear to the reader whether his gesture is caring or threatening. His gentleness in this moment, combined with his earlier reverence for Lucynell, suggest that he might just want to help. On the other hand, his appreciation for her beauty, and the knowledge that she's unconscious and completely at his mercy, contain a subtle threat of potential sexual violence. The reader is never able to resolve that uncertainty: Shiftlet leaves too quickly. His abandonment of Lucynell is fast and thorough.

☛ There were times when Mr. Shiftlet 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 hitchhiker. Occasionally he saw a sign that warned: "Drive carefully. The life you save may be your own."

**Related Characters:** Tom Shiftlet

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 154

### Explanation and Analysis

This moment comes as Shiftlet is driving away from the restaurant where he left Lucynell. The unusually flat and objective sentence "There were times when Mr. Shiftlet preferred not to be alone" suggests, without actually saying, that this is one of those times. For most of the paragraph we're closely aligned with Shiftlet's perspective in a close third person point of view, but this one sentence takes a step back and seems to be coming from an omniscient narrator. That degree of separation suggests that Shiftlet feels subconscious guilt about abandoning Lucynell, but is not able to admit it, even to himself.


His sudden generosity towards others emphasizes this sense of repressed guilt. He notes that "a man with a car had a responsibility to others" and starts actively looking for a hitchhiker he can help, perhaps as a subtle way of atoning for abandoning Lucynell.

This moment is also significant because it contains the story's title: "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" comes from a highway safety sign. In context, the phrase takes on a double meaning: it reminds Shiftlet of the ongoing potential for salvation. He has consistently made choices that lead away from spiritual salvation—but he could still stop at any time, turn the car around, and save his own spirit.

☛ 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!"

**Related Characters:** Tom Shiftlet

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 156

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes from the second-to-last paragraph of the story, right after Shiftlet's young hitchhiker has insulted

both of their mothers and jumped out of the moving car rather than listen to Shiftlet talk. The storm is approaching, and Shiftlet is feeling alone and dejected. The “rotteness of the world” has been a recurring talking point for Shiftlet, but what’s interesting here is that he doesn’t seem capable of recognizing that he, too, is part of that rotteness. He feels rejected by the boy he tried to help, but he doesn’t connect that to Lucynell, who he abandoned in much worse and more vulnerable circumstances. Instead, he feels as though the world’s rotteness is “about to engulf him,” which suggests he sees himself as an innocent victim rather than

part of the problem.

Shiftlet’s prayer to God, in which he begs God to “wash the slime from this earth,” conjures an image of another great flood like the one God sent in the biblical Book of Genesis. However, Shiftlet still isn’t capable of recognizing himself as one of the sinners in need of a cleanse—immediately after this moment, in the last paragraph of the story, he steps on the gas and races the shower, only ever letting it wash over the very back of his car. This represents a rejection of the grace he’s asked for.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

## THE LIFE YOU SAVE MAY BE YOUR OWN

An old woman and her daughter are sitting on their porch when a stranger, Mr. Shiftlet, approaches. Even from afar with the sunset blinding her, the old woman can tell that the man is only a “tramp” and she shouldn’t be afraid of him. The daughter, meanwhile, can’t see very well and keeps playing with her fingers. The stranger only has one arm, but in his good hand he’s carrying a toolbox. As Shiftlet gets closer to her yard, she stands up to greet him, and her daughter—noticing him for the first time—stomps her feet and makes “excited speechless sounds.”

As Shiftlet steps into the yard, he casually puts down his toolbox and tips his hat as though the daughter weren’t at all “afflicted.” They can see that he’s a fairly young man. The old woman greets him and he doesn’t answer, instead raising his arms—including his shorter one—towards the sunset, making the shape of a “crooked cross” and holding the pose for almost a minute. When he finally drops his arms, he says he’d “give a fortune” to see a sunset like this every night. The old woman affirms that the sunset is always like this here.

The daughter watches Shiftlet carefully, so he offers her a piece of gum. She takes it, but when he offers the old woman one, she shows him that she doesn’t have any teeth. By this point, Shiftlet has already looked over everything in their yard, but his eyes settle on an old, rusted **car**. When he asks if they drive it, the old woman says that the car hasn’t run in 15 years, since the day her husband died. Shiftlet replies that nothing is as it once was, and the world is “almost rotten” now.

*The story opens at sunset, a period of transition from light to dark that foreshadows the significance of Shiftlet’s arrival. It’s clear the old woman and her daughter live a fairly isolated life from the interest they show the stranger. The fact that “tramps” are the most common kind of visitor suggest that this is not a prosperous area. Shiftlet’s missing arm makes him seem vulnerable and tragic, which contributes to the old woman’s sense of safety. Meanwhile, it’s not immediately clear whether the daughter is a child or a disabled adult.*



*Shiftlet’s gentlemanly entrance and courtesy to the daughter create a positive first impression of his character. The word “afflicted” strongly suggests that the daughter is sick or disabled. Because Shiftlet seems to be polite, his behavior in response to the old woman’s greeting seems strange. Instead of responding, he salutes the sun, forming his arms into a “crooked cross.” This language suggests something divine is happening, as the cross is a symbol of Christianity. But it’s also possible that something darker is afoot, given that the cross is crooked. The old woman’s statement that the sun sets like that every night from her farm associates the setting with that same divinity.*



*The daughter’s behavior towards Shiftlet makes it clear she finds him interesting. His kindness towards her continues to contribute to the reader’s positive assessment of his character. The old woman’s toothless mouth is a small moment that suggests decay is everywhere on this small farm; the broken car accomplishes the same thing. Shiftlet’s immediate interest in the car seems intense, but not yet devious. Importantly, the car is associated with Mrs. Crater’s deceased husband, linking it with a deep sense of loss. Shiftlet’s cynicism, introduced here for the first time, contributes to the tone of the story—the world has not been kind to any of these characters.*



As the woman asks more about Shiftlet, his eyes remain fixed on the **car**. She introduces herself as Lucynell Crater, which is also her daughter's name. When she asks why he's here, he's mentally estimating the car's age, but he replies by saying that there's a doctor in Atlanta who cut a man's heart out of his chest and studied it. Even so, that doctor "don't know no more about it than you or me." Mrs. Crater agrees, and Shiftlet clarifies that the doctor still wouldn't know anything about the heart if he cut every inch of it. When Mrs. Crater asks where Shiftlet is from, he doesn't answer.

Shiftlet rolls a cigarette, lights it, and stares for a while as the flame of his match descends towards his skin. Lucynell, the daughter, begins making worried noises, and he blows it out. Slyly, he tells Mrs. Crater that these days, people will say anything. He can tell her that his name is Tom Shiftlet and he's from Tennessee, but she won't know that he isn't someone else from somewhere else. Irritated, Mrs. Crater acknowledges that she knows nothing about him, and he replies that while people lie all the time, he can at least say he's a man. Then his tone grows darker and he asks, "what is a man?"

Mrs. Crater asks Shiftlet what he carries in his toolbox. He replies that he's carrying tools because he's a carpenter. Mrs. Crater tells him he can hang around and work for food, but she can't pay him in money. Shiftlet leans back and says that there are some things that mean more to some men than money. He then starts asking a lot of questions about what a man is for while Mrs. Crater wonders whether a one-armed man can fix her roof. He also claims to have traveled far and wide, worked a number of jobs, and fought in a war. As the moon rises, he says he wishes he lived in a "desolate place" like this where you can see the sun go down "like God made it to do."

*Shiftlet's continued focus on the car hints that it will be increasingly significant as the story unfolds. The fact that the mother and the daughter are both named Lucynell Crater contributes to the sense that this farm is stuck in the past. Even worse, the younger Lucynell Crater doesn't seem destined to progress past her mother—instead, she's likely to always be dependent on her, which their twinned names also suggest. Shiftlet's meditation on the nature of knowledge comes out of nowhere, another hint that he's an unconventional person. The anecdote about the doctor in Atlanta has an anti-authority and anti-intellectual streak: Shiftlet doesn't accept scientific discovery as worthwhile. Moreover, the physical heart in the story stands in for the metaphorical heart, exemplifying a core theme of the story: human nature is unknowable.*



*Shiftlet's wry response to Mrs. Crater's simple question again emphasizes the impossibility of truly knowing anything about another person. He tells her his name and where he's from, but by pointing out how easily he could be lying he casts doubt on everything else he's said so far. She's frustrated by this, but strangely Shiftlet's acknowledgment that he could be lying seems to make him more trustworthy. Shiftlet's preoccupation with what defines a man, meanwhile, points to his own insecurities about his masculinity.*



*Shiftlet seems affronted by Mrs. Crater's question about what he carries in his toolbox, even though he's just given her every reason to doubt external appearances. The conversation about money emphasizes the characters' poverty, but Shiftlet seems offended by Mrs. Crater's assumption that he's after money. He again seems preoccupied with what defines a man, and Mrs. Crater's private doubts about his missing arm suggest that he's not wrong to feel some insecurity. Shiftlet's sudden talkativeness about his background, so soon after he pointed out how easily he could lie about himself, is hard to take entirely seriously. His observation about the Crater's farm being remote, desolate, and how "God made it" associate the farm with holiness, as if it's a strange kind of Eden.*



Mrs. Crater asks Shiftlet if he's married. He says no, asking where a man could find an innocent woman rather than "trash." Lucynell falls and begins to whimper. Shiftlet asks if she's Mrs. Crater's daughter, and Mrs. Crater says she is. She says Lucynell is "smart," and can cook and wash, and that she wouldn't let any man take her away for anything. Shiftlet agrees. Mrs. Crater insists that any man who came for Lucynell would have to stick around.

Shiftlet's eye catches the glittering **automobile** again. He says he can fix anything on the farm, even with one arm. He exclaims that he's a man, if not a "whole one." Mrs. Crater, unimpressed, says he can stay and work for food if he doesn't mind sleeping in the car. Shiftlet, grinning, responds that the monks of old slept in their coffins. Mrs. Crater responds that they weren't as advanced.

Shiftlet stays on the farm and begins to work, quickly making a difference. He patches up steps, fixes the fence, and even teaches Lucynell to say the word "bird," the first word she's ever spoken. Mrs. Crater watches him work with pleasure, "ravenous" for a son-in-law.

Shiftlet sleeps in the **car** at night, where he's made a neat little bedroom setup in the backseat. In the evening he sits on the porch and talks while Mrs. Crater listens and Lucynell rocks back and forth. He says he's working to improve the farm because he's taken a "personal interest" in it, and that he even plans to make the car run. He's studied the broken car and says that it was built back when cars were "really built" by a single craftsman with a "personal interest." He says that cars are worse and more expensive nowadays because you have to pay "all those men" in an assembly line rather than paying just one. Mrs. Crater agrees.

*Mrs. Crater's interest in whether or not Shiftlet is married is a clue to her desire for a son-in-law. Shiftlet's response—that he wants an innocent woman rather than trash—introduces a dichotomy of female virtue that will become significant later on. Lucynell's fall makes her seem vulnerable and helpless, and while her mother seems to love and value her, it's significant that Mrs. Crater's idea of value and what it means to be "smart" revolves around doing household chores. The idea that Lucynell should get married seems totally divorced from the reality of her character, but Mrs. Crater doesn't notice or care.*



*The automobile, described as glittering in the dark, appears increasingly seductive to Shiftlet. He proclaims his masculinity despite his disability, which seem linked together in his mind. Shiftlet's excitement when Mrs. Crater says he can sleep in the car again points to how intensely focused on the car he is.*



*Shiftlet's rapid progress around the farm frames him as a fixer, a teacher, and a potential man of the house. He's doing good work, repairing broken things like Christ (a fellow carpenter) did, and his kindness to Lucynell suggests he cares about her. Mrs. Crater's desire for a son-in-law seems desperate and almost greedy based on the description of her being ravenous.*



*The description of Shiftlet's meticulous bedroom setup in the car emphasizes the extent to which he's settled in—both in the car and at the farm more broadly. Shiftlet's comment about his personal interest in the farm also implies that he might consider staying there, and Mrs. Crater certainly would like for that to be the case. His anti-industrialist speech about the problem with modern cars reinforces the recurring idea of the world being rotten. However, he's wrong: assembly line production drastically lowered the price of cars in the early 20th century. Mrs. Crater's agreement emphasizes the naivete of both characters, and the extent of Mrs. Crater's deference to Shiftlet.*



Shiftlet says the trouble with the world is that nobody takes any trouble, pointing out how he was able to teach Lucynell a word just by taking the time. Mrs. Crater asks Shiftlet to teach Lucynell another word. He asks which word and Mrs. Crater, wearing a “suggestive” smile, chooses “sugarpie.” Shiftlet realizes she’s got something on her mind.

The next day Shiftlet tells Mrs. Crater that if she buys a fan belt he can make the **car** run. She agrees to give him the money. Then she points to Lucynell and tells him that if a man ever wanted to take Lucynell away she would say no, but if he wanted to marry her and stay on the farm she would agree, since Lucynell is “the sweetest girl in the world.” Shiftlet asks how old Lucynell is and Mrs. Crater says 15 or 16, even though she’s actually around 30, which seems believable because of Lucynell’s “innocence.”

The next day Shiftlet goes into town and buys the missing part and some gasoline. Later, Mrs. Crater hears a strange noise and rushes into the shed, thinking Lucynell is having a fit. Instead, she finds Lucynell crying out “Burrddttt!” in excitement because Shiftlet has managed to make the **car** run. He has “an expression of serious modesty as if he had just raised the dead” as he sits in the driver’s seat.

That night, Mrs. Crater asks Shiftlet sympathetically whether he wants an “innocent” woman, not “none of this trash.” Shiftlet agrees that he does. Mrs. Crater goes on, saying he should have a woman who can’t talk, “can’t sass you back or use foul language,” and points to Lucynell, who is sitting cross-legged with both feet in her hands. Shiftlet admits that she wouldn’t be “any trouble.”

*Shiftlet’s kindness towards Lucynell continues, and it still seems like he genuinely cares for her. However, his role as a teacher to her is more paternal and platonic than romantic—and so Mrs. Crater’s suggestion that Shiftlet teach Lucynell a term of endearment seems like a misread of the situation on her part. It communicates to Shiftlet that she’s plotting a marriage.*



*This passage emphasizes that Shiftlet is primarily interested in the car, but Mrs. Crater is primarily interested in marrying off her daughter. In an attempt to make her daughter seem attractive, Mrs. Crater emphasizes Lucynell’s sweetness and innocence, qualities that are partially rooted in her disability. She also claims Lucynell is a teenager rather than an adult woman in a bid to make her seem more sexually attractive. Mrs. Crater’s lie emphasizes the absurdity of “innocence” as a desirable female trait: even Lucynell, whose disability renders her unable to communicate, is not sufficiently innocent as a 30-year-old to be enticing. Instead, she has to also be 15.*



*This scene is the climax of Shiftlet’s series of good works around the Crater farm. His ability to resurrect the long-dead automobile parallels Christ’s miracle of raising the dead, and this comparison is one of the most explicit moments that casts Shiftlet as a Christlike figure. His expression of “serious modesty” while doing so is ironic, adding humor to the moment while also suggesting a degree of insincerity and performance to Shiftlet’s composure.*



*By repeating his own words back to him, Mrs. Crater tries to trap Shiftlet into agreeing that Lucynell is the right woman for him. Her argument that Lucynell will make a good wife relies on Lucynell’s silence as a result of her disability: a woman who can’t talk can’t “sass” her husband, and this docility and lack of independence is seen as desirable under a patriarchal system, even to another woman. Shiftlet’s agreement that Lucynell wouldn’t give him “trouble” emphasizes the extent to which the ideal woman in the characters’ time and place is one who is easy to control.*





Mrs. Crater tells him they can drive into town on Saturday and get married. Shiftlet protests that he can't get married without any money; he says he wouldn't marry a woman if he couldn't take her on a trip and treat her. He says he was raised that way by his mother. Mrs. Crater protests that Lucynell doesn't know the difference and points out that he'd be getting a permanent home and "the most innocent girl in the world." She also tells him angrily that "there ain't any place in the world for a poor disabled friendless drifting man."

Shiftlet contemplates the "ugly words" that settle in his head "like a group of buzzards." He rolls a cigarette and says evenly that a man is divided into two parts, body and spirit. The body is like a house and stays put, Shiftlet says, but a man's spirit is like an automobile, "always on the move." Mrs. Crater responds by listing her home's amenities: it's warm in winter, has a well that never runs dry, and now has a working **automobile**. At the mention of the automobile Shiftlet's "smile stretche[s] like a weary snake waking up by a fire" before he "recall[s]" himself. He says he would still have to take his wife out for a weekend to follow his spirit.

Mrs. Crater offers \$15 for a weekend trip, saying it's the best she can do. Shiftlet barter[s], saying that would only cover gas and a hotel, not food. Mrs. Crater counters with \$17.50, saying it isn't any use trying to "milk" her, a word choice Shiftlet is "deeply hurt" by. He suspects she has more money sewed up in her mattress, but he says he's not interested in her money. He agrees to the wedding.

Shiftlet, Lucynell, and Mrs. Crater drive into town on Saturday. Shiftlet and Lucynell are married at the courthouse. Shiftlet complains afterwards, looking morose and bitter. He says the ceremony didn't satisfy him as it was just paperwork and blood tests. He repeats a line from his earlier anecdote about the doctor studying a heart, saying "If they was to take my heart and cut it out... they wouldn't know a thing about me." Mrs. Crater responds sharply that it satisfied the law, and Shiftlet spits before saying that the law doesn't satisfy him.

*Shiftlet uses his supposed chivalrous code as an excuse to hide his reluctance to marry Lucynell, claiming that he can't get married if he can't "treat" his wife. At this point, it's unclear if he's sincere, but by claiming a strict adherence to the masculine role of the provider, he's trying to avoid scrutiny. Mrs. Crater's cruel words demonstrate how angry she is at his refusal, and therefore how desperate she is for this marriage. Even though she's been deferent to Shiftlet throughout the story, and genuinely wants him as a son-in-law, she's willing to use his biggest insecurity to win the argument as soon as she thinks she might not get what she wants.*



*Shiftlet is hurt by Mrs. Crater's words, made clear by the line about the buzzards settling in his head. However, he doesn't let on that this is the case, instead speaking "evenly"—once again, Shiftlet's control over his expression seems almost dishonest. His comparison of his spirit to an automobile suggests that he could abandon the Craters at any time, and it also intensifies his identification in the story with the Craters' car. It's Mrs. Crater's mention of the car that rouses Shiftlet's snakelike smile, a negative comparison that is a major turning point for how Shiftlet is characterized. In the light of that simile, Shiftlet's quick agreement to marry Lucynell is deeply suspicious.*



*Shiftlet's bargaining with Mrs. Crater for more money sets off alarm bells that he perhaps isn't entirely invested in marrying Lucynell. Nevertheless, Shiftlet internally claims to be "deeply hurt" by Mrs. Crater's observation that he's trying to "milk" her, a reaction that reads as insincere after the description of his smile "like a weary snake waking up." The suggestion that even his own inner thoughts can be inauthentic suggests a deep disconnect between Shiftlet's self-image and his actual nature.*



*Shiftlet's bitterness on the day of his wedding sets the marriage off to a bad start. He seems frustrated with the superficial nature of the ceremony, echoing his earlier language of how nobody can know "a thing about me" through medical or, in this case, legal examination. Mrs. Crater, meanwhile, is satisfied with the conventions of a legal marriage ceremony, and upset by Shiftlet's lack of respect for them.*



They get in the **car**. Mrs. Crater comments on how pretty Lucynell looks, like a baby doll. Lucynell has a “placid expression,” every so often changed by a “sly isolated little thought like a shoot of green in the desert.” Mrs. Crater says to Shiftlet that he got a prize. Shiftlet doesn’t even look at her.

*Mrs. Crater’s comments compare Lucynell to an inanimate object, emphasizing how little anyone in this story seems to view Lucynell as a real person. Instead, she’s framed as a doll or a prize, to be handed off to a husband at everyone else’s convenience. The description of Lucynell as having a “placid expression” and “isolated” thoughts compounds the sense that she has no idea what’s happening to her, creating a horrific mood in the aftermath of her marriage. Shiftlet’s complete lack of interest in her makes it clear that he’s got something else on his mind, though.*



They drive back to the farm, where Shiftlet drops Mrs. Crater off. She cries as she says goodbye to Lucynell, saying she has never been parted from her daughter for even two days before while Shiftlet stares at the motor. Mrs. Crater says it’s alright because she knows Shiftlet will do right by her. She clutches at Lucynell, who doesn’t seem to see her at all. Shiftlet eases the **car** forward to release her grip and then drives off.

*Mrs. Crater’s tearful goodbye to Lucynell contrasts with Lucynell’s neutral, unseeing expression, which again suggests that she has no idea what is happening to her. Mrs. Crater’s belief that she’ll see her daughter again in just two days—and that Shiftlet will “do right”—reads as ominous in context with Shiftlet’s increasingly detached and selfish behavior. His impatience to drive off is another clue that he doesn’t care about either woman’s wellbeing; he literally forces Mrs. Crater to let go of Lucynell (and the car!) by stepping on the gas.*



The afternoon is clear and blue and the **car** helps Shiftlet forget his earlier bitterness. He has always wanted a car but could never afford it. He drives very fast, because he wants to make Mobile by nightfall.

*The huge reveal in this paragraph is that Shiftlet has no intention of going on a nice little weekend holiday with Lucynell—he has a different destination in mind, the coastal city of Mobile. The clear blue sky adds a sense of optimism to this scene, which mirrors Shiftlet’s own mood but contrasts heavily with the revelation that Shiftlet has been after the car the whole time.*



Shiftlet eventually looks at Lucynell, who is pulling cherries off her hat and throwing them out the window, and becomes depressed. After about a hundred miles he decides she must be hungry and pulls over at a roadside restaurant.

*It takes a while for Shiftlet to even remember Lucynell—clearly, she’s extraneous to his plans. His depression looking at her, and his decision to make sure she gets a good meal, suggest some lingering kindness and affection towards her. He’s clearly never wanted her for a bride, but he did at one point behave generously towards her and at this moment it seems he might continue doing so. They’re already more than a hundred miles from the farm, emphasizing how lost and vulnerable she is.*



Shiftlet orders Lucynell a plate of food and she immediately falls asleep in the empty restaurant. He tells the waiter to give the food to her when she wakes up. The waiter comments “She looks like an angel of Gawd,” and Shiftlet says she’s just a hitchhiker, and that he has to leave to make Tuscaloosa. The waiter touches a finger to Lucynell’s hair and Shiftlet leaves.

*Lucynell falls asleep at a pivotal moment in the story, which means she’s even less aware than usual about what’s happening. The waiter’s comment that Lucynell looks like an angel—spoken with hushed reverence at her beauty—is an important moment, because it explicitly associates Lucynell with holiness and divinity despite her often hapless characterization. Shiftlet’s callousness towards her in this scene fully confirms his distance from God: by describing her as a mere hitchhiker and abandoning her to an uncertain fate, he’s done something truly sinful.*



As Shiftlet drives on he becomes more depressed. The afternoon becomes sultry and hot and a **storm cloud** gathers in the distance. The narrator notes that there “were times” when Shiftlet preferred not to be alone. Shiftlet reflects that “a man with a **car** had a responsibility to others” and keeps an eye out for hitchhikers. He also sees a billboard that says “Drive carefully. The life you save may be your own.”

*Shiftlet is upset after abandoning Lucynell, but he can’t seem to articulate why. The narration suggests he feels lonely in this moment, but the vagueness and distance of the language—“there were times”—reads like he can’t identify these feelings of loneliness and guilt on his own. Nevertheless, he seems to want to atone for something by picking up a hitchhiker. The gathering storm clouds symbolize his dark mood the way the blue sky symbolized his earlier optimistic one. The billboard, which contains the title of the story, suggests that salvation is available to Shiftlet if he “drives carefully”—that is, if he behaves with virtue, and turns the car around.*



As the sun begins to set Shiftlet sees a small shack. He stops for a hitchhiker, a young boy in overalls who doesn’t have his thumb out but is carrying a cheap suitcase. The boy says nothing before getting in the **car**. His silence bothers Shiftlet, so Shiftlet starts talking about his mother, how much she taught him about right and wrong, and how much he regrets leaving her. “My mother was an angel of Gawd,” he says, tearing up and slowing down the car. The boy yells insults about both their mothers and jumps out of the moving car into a ditch.

*The encounter with the hitchhiker rattles Shiftlet because his attempt at atonement—kindness to a stranger, praise towards his mother, an “angel of Gawd” like Lucynell—is roundly rejected. The hitchhiker has no interest in Shiftlet’s rambling memories of a mother’s love, and indeed is so offended by them that he jumps out of the moving car. Shiftlet’s attempt at an act of generosity therefore fails completely.*



Shiftlet is so shocked he drives for a while with the door open. More storm clouds begin to gather. He feels as if “the rottenness of the world was about to engulf him.” He cries out to God, asking Him to wash the slime from the earth. The **rain** begins to fall and eventually crashes over the rear of Shiftlet’s **car**, but he steps on the gas and races the shower into Mobile.

*Shiftlet is upset by this encounter, and the gathering storm clouds mirror his darkening mood. The “rottenness” of the world, a frequent motif throughout the story, finally reaches its peak in his mind, as if it’s “about to engulf” him—which is curious, as he still seems to view himself as a victim of the approaching rottenness rather than an active participant. His prayer to God for a cleanse of the “slime” contrasts with his commitment to avoiding the rain storm that most closely symbolizes the kind of biblical flood he seems to be asking for. As he continues to race the rain towards Mobile, he seems to have learned nothing.*





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