

Flannery O'Connor: The Life You Save May Be Your Own

1. Vocabulary

- Gaunt (figure, p. 1) –
Slick (hair, p. 1) –
Cautious sly (look, p. 1) –
Rusted (back of an automobile, p. 1) –
Carpenter (I'm a carpenter, p. 2) –
Whimper (began to whimper, p. 3) –
Ravenous (She was ravenous for a son of the law, p. 4) –
Trash (You don't want none of this trash, p. 5) –
Milk (...it isn't any use you trying to milk me, p. 6) –
Rue (I never rued a day in my life, p. 7) –
Pole cat (correctly: polecat; a stinking pole cat, p. 8) –

2. Discussion questions

- a) What is the setting of the story?
- b) Who are the main characters?
- c) Explain who Mr. Shiftlet is? What does he look like?
- d) What is ironic about Mr. Shiftlet saying:
"Nothing is like it used to be, lady," he said. "The world is almost rotten."? (p. 1)
- e) Describe Lucynell Crater (the daughter).
- f) How old does Mrs. Crater tell Mr. Shiftlet her daughter is? How old is she?
- g) Why does Mr. Shiftlet want to fix Mrs. Crater's car?
- h) What does Mr. Shiftlet teach her to say and why does Lucynell want her daughter to learn the word "sugarpie"? (p. 4)
- i) What seems to be the secret intentions of Mrs. Crater? What skills does she state her daughter has?
- j) What did the daughter and Mr. Shiftlet end up doing? How did they get there?
- k) What do you think happens to Lucynell?
- l) What is ironic about the narrator's comment that he kept his eye out for a hitchhiker?
"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 hitch-hiker." (p. 7)
- m) What does the cloud descending allude to?
"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!'" (p. 8)
- n) What is the significance of the title of the story? O'Connor's original title for this story was *The World Is Almost Rotten*. How does her decision to change the title alter your understanding of the story's meaning?
- o) What is the significance of Tom Shiftlet's name?
- p) Is Shiftlet a hero or an antihero?
- q) What does Lucynell represent?
- r) Explain the humour in this text and how it functions within the short story.