Bargains with the Devil: Greed, Judgment, and Moral Allegory in Flannery O'Connor's "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" and Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Friar's Tale"

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Although Flannery O'Connor's short story "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" and Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Friar's Tale" from *The Canterbury Tales* might appear to be worlds apart – one written in the mid-20th-century American South and the other in medieval England –, their exploration of greed and moral corruption resonate strongly. This essay will examine the parallels between the two works, arguing that, despite their contextual differences, O'Connor's short story can be interpreted as a modern adaptation of "The Friar's Tale".

Julie Sanders's "Adaptation and Appropriation," identifies three categories of adaptations based on Deborah Cartmell's framework: transposition, commentary, and analogue (Sanders 25). According to this framework, Flannery O'Connor's "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," positioned as an adaptation, can primarily be understood as an analogue in relation to Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Friar's Tale". Although O'Connor does not directly replicate the narrative or characters of Chaucer's tale, her short story reflects them along with the central themes of moral corruption, greed, and divine judgment, while incorporating numerous motifs of the tale. She contextualises the same basic plot structure – a "bargain with the devil" – within the Southern gothic framework of her modern world, while also offering a sharp social critique. As Sanders points out, analogues are "stand-alone works that nevertheless gain layers of meaning when their status as analogue is revealed" (Sanders 29). Therefore, a comparative analysis of the two texts might offer new perspectives on O'Connor's short story, while also placing Chaucer's tale in a modern, Southern gothic context. At the same time, "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" can also be read as a commentary on the moral and spiritual aspects of "The Friar's Tale," in the context of the mid-20th-century American South.

Additionally, although Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Friar's Tale" can be read as a standout narrative about greed, corruption, and divine justice, it is important to acknowledge its role as an organic part of *The Canterbury Tales*. However, given the essay's scope and length, the focus here will remain on "The Friar's Tale," examining its themes, motifs and their connection to O'Connor's short story. The version of Chaucer's work referenced in this essay is Nevill

Coghill's translation, which is a possible version O'Connor may have read, considering the dates of publication and some shared elements between his text and O'Connor's.

Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, and thus "The Friar's Tale," emerges from late 14th-century England, and a society in which the teachings of the Catholic Church permeated daily life, influencing not only religious practices but also societal expectations. The Church's doctrines on sin, redemption, and the afterlife provided a framework for understanding personal responsibility and divine judgment, which in general governed much of the worldview of medieval England.

> The medieval worldview was symbolic, based on the fundamental assumption that creation was an imprint of God's will and intention, and that visible (changing and less essential) things pointed toward the invisible (permanent and primary). The message of medieval symbolism was that nothing is merely what it seems, which thesis resulted in multiple levels of biblical explanation and interpretation (hermeneutics and exegesis). From this same principle follows the idea that multiple meanings and interpretations of things and texts can coexist, and that the elimination of ambiguity or reduction to a single meaning is unnecessary, as each interpretation illuminates human understanding and leads humanity toward the divine essence in a different way. The world, therefore, is a mirror in which one can – and must – read (Karáth 37, my translation).

In contrast, Flannery O'Connor's short story reflects the tensions of the modern American South. Set against the backdrop of a region marked by the complex aftermath of the Civil War, O'Connor's narrative grapples with the themes of economic challenge, disillusionment, and alienation in a world where the traditional Southern values – both glorified and questioned by the public – are in conflict with the day-to-day realities of a changing society. The lost Civil War reshaped the South's economic and social structures, leaving a legacy that reverberated into the 20th century and exposed the contradictions in Southern identity, as well as the tension between traditions and the demands of modernization – themes central to the Southern gothic genre. Although primarily known for her use of Southern gothic style, dark humour, grotesque characters, and sharp social commentary to highlight the Southern experience and its moral complexities, O'Connor often frames her works through the lens of

Christian morality. The devout Catholic author's intense search for the possibilities of grace in a deeply flawed modern world is an essential part of her legacy.

The short story titled "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" stands out even from Flannery O'Connor's complex body of work as one of her most ambiguous pieces, inviting multiple interpretations, as noted by Charles M. Hegarty's "A Man Though not Yet a Whole One: Mr. Shiftlet's Genesis". Although Hegarty uses the term "ambivalent," he essentially addresses the story's inherent ambiguity and deep sense of mystery (24). This quality of ambiguity resonates with medieval exegesis, which emphasises multiple meanings, and can be applied to the short story, revealing deeper moral and theological insights, while also offering an intriguing parallel to Chaucer's "The Friar's Tale".

O'Connor herself mentions medieval exegesis, highlighting its importance in an essay titled "The Nature and Aim of Fiction". Her words reflect both the medieval worldview described above and her intense search for the workings of grace:

> The kind of vision the fiction writer needs to have, or to develop, in order to increase the meaning of his story is called anagogical vision, and that is the kind of vision that is able to see different levels of reality in one image or one situation. The medieval commentators on Scripture found three kinds of meaning in the literal level of the sacred text: one they called allegorical, in which one fact pointed to another; one they called tropological, or moral, which had to do with what should be done; and one they called anagogical, which had to do with the Divine life and our participation in it. Although this was a method applied to biblical exegesis, it was also an attitude toward all of creation, and a way of reading nature which included most possibilities, and I think it is this enlarged view of the human scene that the fiction writer has to cultivate if he is ever going to write stories that have any chance of becoming a permanent part of our literature ("The Nature and Aim of Fiction", 72–73).

Thus, although "The Friar's Tale" and "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" were written in different periods and cultures, their similarities might not be as surprising after all. While the two works have seemingly disparate plots, a notable parallel gradually emerges from their points of view and their themes, motifs and structures as well. The similarities and differences in their respective tonalities and genres further underpin this parallel.

In “The Friar’s Tale”, Geoffrey Chaucer combines elements of the exemplum and the fabliau. As a fabliau, it features bawdy, lighthearted humour, crude behaviour, and exaggerated characters – traits that are characteristic of the genre, thus providing the satirical tone of the fabliau tradition. His use of ridiculous extremes may even evoke a sense of contemporary absurd humour, as seen in instances such as calling a frying pan “new” in the context that the widow of the tale, an “old fiddle . . . an ancient wreck,” already owned it when her husband was still alive and she allegedly “cuckolded” him (Chaucer 301–302).

However, at the same time, the tale also functions as an exemplum, offering a moral lesson on the consequences of deceit and greed. As an exemplum, it aligns with the more elevated storytelling traditions of the medieval period and is rooted in Christian teachings. Chaucer’s skilful integration of various genres demonstrates his narrative mastery, blending humour and moral instructions. This combination engages his audience on multiple levels, evoking both amusement and reflection on human nature, while also emphasising the importance of Christian teachings.

In Chaucer’s “The Friar’s Tale”, to provide a short summary, a corrupt summoner, who extorts money from those he summons to ecclesiastical courts, encounters a yeoman while on his way to extort money from an old, impoverished widow. Initially, the summoner is friendly toward the yeoman, especially as he soon reveals that they share the profession of bailiff. The yeoman appears to be a simple servant at first, but eventually discloses his true identity as a fiend from Hell, a servant of Satan. Despite this revelation, the summoner remains untroubled and pledges himself to ally with the yeoman-devil, forming a bond of brotherhood.

As the two continue their journey, they encounter a carter whose cart is stuck in the mud, then they go on to reach the farm of the poor widow. The summoner attempts to extort money from her through false accusations, demanding payment to avoid a court summons, that is, he bargains for a bribe, and in his excessive greed he even wants to take the widow’s “new” frying pan. The widow, shocked by the summoner’s corrupt dealings, false accusations and hypocrisy, calls upon the devil to take both him and the pan, unless the summoner repents. The summoner refuses to repent, and the yeoman, the devil in disguise, claims the summoner’s soul, taking both him and the pan.

Similarly, in “The Life You Save May Be Your Own”, Flannery O’Connor merges humour with moral complexity, echoing the dual aspects of the genre of Chaucer’s tale. Her grotesque characters embody exaggerations and moral flaws with a satirical edge, recalling characteristics of a fabliau. Additionally, O’Connor’s story also moves beyond vulgarity, delving into deeper themes of the divine judgement and the possibility of grace. The Southern

gothic setting and the moral ambiguity of her characters lend a darker, more existential tone to her narrative, balancing her humour with a serious exploration of morality, just like the fragmentation of modern society with an ultimate interconnectedness. Additionally, the title itself also frames the short story as a moral lesson, alluding to an exemplum, emphasising the consequences of one's actions and the possibility and importance of redemption.

In "The Life You Save May Be Your Own", the story finds the mysterious Tom T. Shiftlet, a one-armed drifter, arriving at the farm of Lucynell Crater, an impoverished old widow living with her mentally challenged and deaf daughter. The daughter is also named Lucynell Crater, and in her condition, she apparently cannot really assert a personality of her own, thus in a sense remaining an echo of her mother. Wanting a son-in-law and workforce on the farm, a former plantation, Mrs. Crater offers Mr. Shiftlet food and shelter in exchange for his work. Their initial mutual accord soon leads to an arrangement in which Mr. Shiftlet, who turns out to be a real handyman, and is motivated by the prospect of acquiring the family's car, agrees to marry Mrs. Crater's daughter. However, after the marriage, he abandons his bride, and rides away with the car, looking for hitch-hikers.

Both "The Friar's Tale" and "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" centre on characters who serve as vehicles for social critique: the summoner's hypocrisy reflects both individual corruption and the institutional corruption of the medieval church, while Mr. Shiftlet and Mrs. Crater mirror the existential and moral decay of the mid-20th-century American South. While the summoner presents himself as an agent of ecclesiastical justice, yet using his position to extort money from the vulnerable, Mrs. Crater's character, for example, is a distorted version of the traditional archetype of both the Southern lady and the matriarch, trying to secure the future of her family, yet using her mentally challenged daughter as a bargaining chip to gain free workforce. Unlike the idealized image of the Southern lady, embodying grace, refinement, and hospitability, and the Southern matriarch, traditionally seen as a nurturing yet authoritative figure, the character of Mrs. Crater distorts these roles with her manipulative behaviour and exploitation of power, presenting a grotesque and exaggerated version of both.

Louise Westling argues that O'Connor's mother-and-daughter motif appears, though in different variations, "in so many other stories beside those in which it is central, that the emphasis appears almost obsessive" (Westling 511). Additionally, the rural setting is also frequently present in O'Connor's works, symbolising both the region's economic reliance on agriculture and its traditional strong connection to the land. Images of decaying mansions, farms, former plantations are also omnipresent in her stories, indicating the societal changes and moral numbness of the region. These aspects are definitely present and symbolised in

multiple ways in the narration of “The Life You Save May Be Your Own”, as well as in the telling name of Crater.

The characters of “The Friar’s Tale” also seem to be present in “The Life You Save May Be Your Own”, only merged into each other in the characters of the short story. For example, Mrs. Crater appears to combine elements of the old widow and the summoner. Moreover, her name puns on “carter”, which evokes the motif of her car as one of the few items mentioned on her farm. Both the car and the character of Mrs. Crater symbolise the inability to change, stagnation, and motionlessness. Mrs. Crater’s car, which has not run for fifteen years since her husband’s death, along with her decaying farm, highlights her resistance to change. Her failure to repair the car or restore the farm symbolises her emotional and psychological stagnation, trapped in a bygone era and unable to adapt to the demands of a changing world.

Mrs. Crater shares several characteristics with Chaucer’s old widow. For instance, she is depicted as a toothless, elderly woman wearing a man’s hat, and her figure is likened to “a cedar fence post” (O’Connor 146); her strong connection to her out-of-the place farm is reflected in how she is described with elements of the surrounding landscape. Similarly, Chaucer’s widow is a “poor old hag” (Chaucer 301). She says: “I couldn’t walk so far, nor even ride/’Twould kill me” (Chaucer 301). Both Mrs. Crater and Chaucer’s widows are depicted as exceedingly frugal, each claiming to possess little and insisting that it is no use to pressure them into parting with their belongings. In Mrs. Crater’s case these are money for honeymoon and lunch, as well as her car, which stopped running the day her husband died. An earlier version of the story includes a moment where she offers to Mr. Shiftlet “her dead husband’s plate, which she had pried from his mouth before they shut the lid on him”, an instance that might also be seen as a distant echo of the frying pan in “The Friar’s Tale”, while alluding to a wrongdoing concerning the dead husband (of which the summoner accuses the widow) (Hegarty 24). In O’Connor’s story, the widow also has an innocent counterpart in her daughter, who bears her name, and lacks a distinct personality.

The shared motifs of Mrs. Crater and the summoner include among others their ability to use venomous words likened to prey-birds. In O’Connor’s story the old widow has a “broad and toothless” smile, resembling the smile of a snake in the context it appears, and her “ugly words settled in Mr. Shiftlet’s head like a group of buzzards in the top of a tree” (O’Connor 150, 152). Moreover, similarly to the summoner, the widow shows little concern for the moral weight of the marriage bargain. Also, at first glance, she decides that Mr. Shiftlet is harmless, and, in a move reminiscent of the summoner’s vow of brotherhood for life, she enters into a marriage agreement with him on behalf of her daughter.

At the same time, Mr. Shiftlet's character reflects both Chaucer's summoner and the yeoman-devil. Similarly to the summoner, he presents himself as a harmless, even pious stranger, while feigning moral considerations and altruism to exploit others for personal gain. This façade is further underscored by O'Connor's portrayal, which frequently employs biblical phrases and Christian imagery, starting at the beginning of the short story, portraying him standing as a "crooked cross". Additionally, his character being a wolf in sheep's clothing is already hinted in his initial description: "his left coat sleeve was folded up to show there was only half an arm in it", while having a "jutting steel-trap jaw" (O'Connor 145, 146). Furthermore, his strange, preachy nature recalls the summoner, who, in Nevill Coghill's translation, is called a "pastor" (Chaucer 294).

In connection with Mr. Shiftlet's character, O'Connor uses recurring motifs of fire and danger: when Mr. Shiftlet lights his cigarette, the portrayal also ties the act to a sense of danger. The first instance warns of the risk of burning, although he is not afraid, while in the second instance – during the final stage of the marriage bargain – his smile is described as "stretched like a weary snake waking up by a fire" (O'Connor 152). Furthermore, this bargain takes place on the porch of the Crater farm, which is described having in front of it a garden with a fig tree and birds – evoking the biblical imagery of Eden, and Satan in it during the scene of temptation in the form of a snake. Moreover, towards the end of the short story, he takes his bride, Lucynell Crater, to a place called "The Hot Spot". He abandons her there dismissively saying that she is only a hitch-hiker, and goes on with the car, looking out for hitch-hikers.

Furthermore, Mr. Shiftlet – whose name and portrayal indicates a shifty, almost shape-shifting nature –, during the initial conversation of the short story, when Mrs. Crater asks who he is and where he has come from, responds evasively. He openly states that no matter what he says, Mrs. Crater could never be sure whether he is telling the truth, that is, who he really is. Turning the question back on her, he even asks, "What is a man?" before declaring, "I'm a man . . . even if I ain't a whole one." (O'Connor 149). This claim, when considered alongside his ambiguous answers, the recurring imagery of fire, biblical allusions, and a comparative reading of "The Friar's Tale", might even raise the suspicion that Mr. Shiftlet, in an allegorical interpretation, could represent more than just an ordinary human being.

Also, he wears a town suit and a hat, carrying a tin box, the content of which is crucial to what Mrs. Crater craves. He soon turns out to be a handyman producing visible improvements on the farm, although his competence, especially to such a great degree, is rather improbable given his one-armed condition. He also speaks at length about the human heart and

its hidden truths, which further reinforces the enigmatic nature of his character and the deeper allegorical possibilities of his role in the story.

Mr. Shiftlet emphasises that "a man is divided into two parts, body and spirit", recalling remarks of Chaucer's yeoman-devil (O'Connor 152). Moreover, the term "spirit" appears to carry a deeper, layered meaning, alluding to a more abstract, non-human force – such as the devil – when Mr. Shiftlet highlights: "the spirit, lady, is like an automobile: always on the move, always…" (O'Connor 152), also echoing "The Friar's Tale".

After leaving her bride in "The Hot Spot", Mr. Shiftlet drives away, while he "kept his eye out for a hitchhiker" (O'Connor 152), and he stops to pick up a boy. But the boy, to his surprise, abandons him, telling: "You go to the devil!", then "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" (O'Connor 156). The storm seems to wash Mr. Shiftlet away, as "he raced the galloping shower into Mobile", which he wanted to reach by the evening – recalling both the summoner's fate and the figure of the yeoman (O'Connor 156).

Furthermore, it seems possible for a moment that Mr. Shiftlet almost regrets his action, and this possibility emerges in the case of Mrs. Crater as well. O'Connor's short story carefully balances the plot of the bargain with the devil with the importance of the possibility of grace and redemption, especially by making the roadsign's warning – or rather its positive promise – the title. By framing the short story with the title similar to an exemplum, she alludes to the words of the friar about repentance, and the importance of the allegorical and moral message of the tale: "Ponder my words, reflect upon my story" (Chaucer 303). The friar finishes his tale saying: "Had I the time to save this Summoner here,/Following texts from Christ and Paul and John" (Chaucer 302). In O'Connor's story, Mr. Shiftlet, after positioning himself as a "crooked cross", talks about the hidden depth of the human heart, recalling the teachings of the apostle Paul on the topic of redemption; later he recalls the essence of the parable of the Good Samaritan, and Lucynell's character probably alludes to "the light of the world" from the Gospel of John – she is the one who is referred by this first name, in contrast to Mrs. Crater –, with her simplicity and purity, which remains untarnished, symbolising a distorted, Southern gothic possibility of grace, even though it is ultimately unrecognised and abandoned.

As a conclusion, Chaucer's "The Friar's Tale" and Flannery O'Connor's "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," though centuries apart, resonate in their portrayal of greed, moral corruption, and divine judgment, while also calling attention to the possibility of grace and redemption, particularly when viewed through the allegorical and moral lenses of medieval exegesis. Their literal narratives of manipulation reflect shared human failings, but the strongest

resonance lies in their deeper moral and spiritual insights, which highlight the enduring relevance of medieval frameworks even in interpreting modern literature.

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