SOFTWARE & TECH

Flannery O Connor The Lame Shall Enter First

PUBLISHED
November 25, 2026

REFERENCE
#1795581170570676

Introduction: The Unsettling Grace of Flannery O’Connor

Few American authors have wielded the pen with such unflinching precision as Flannery O’Connor. Her stories are not merely tales of the Southern Gothic landscape; they are theological battlegrounds where pride is crushed, grace arrives in violent forms, and the human soul is laid bare. Among her most powerful and disturbing works stands **Flannery O’Connor The Lame Shall Enter First**, a story that first appeared in *The Sewanee Review* in 1962 and was later included in her posthumous collection *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. This narrative, dense with irony and religious symbolism, dissects the collision between secular humanism and Christian redemption. It is a story that refuses to comfort the reader, instead forcing a confrontation with the limits of human charity and the terrifying nature of divine intervention. For anyone seeking to understand the depth of O’Connor’s vision, “The Lame Shall Enter First” offers a harrowing meditation on pride, blindness, and the paradoxical entry of the marginalised into the Kingdom of Heaven.

Overview of the Story: A Plot of Misguided Charity

“The Lame Shall Enter First” centres on three primary characters: Sheppard, a well-intentioned but profoundly self-deceived social worker; his neglected son, Norton; and a delinquent teenage boy named Rufus Johnson, whom Sheppard attempts to save. The story opens with Sheppard bringing Rufus, a club-footed fourteen-year-old sent to a reformatory for burglary, into his own home. Sheppard is a secular rationalist who believes that through psychological guidance, material support, and disciplined logic, he can straighten out Rufus’s life.

Sheppard’s efforts, however, are persistently thwarted by Rufus’s stubborn embrace of Christian fundamentalism—a faith Sheppard dismisses as superstition. Meanwhile, Norton, still grieving the recent death of his mother, craves his father’s affection but receives only cold, intellectual lectures. The plot spirals toward tragedy as Sheppard’s obsession with reforming Rufus blinds him to his son’s emotional starvation. Rufus, with his club foot and his Bible, becomes a grotesque mirror that exposes Sheppard’s spiritual lameness. The story’s climax is shocking and devastating, leaving the reader to grapple with the consequences of a love that was, in truth, a form of control.

Major Themes in “The Lame Shall Enter First”

The Failure of Secular Humanism

At its heart, this story is a systematic dismantling of the doctrine that man can save himself through reason and good works. Sheppard is a secular humanist who believes in the inherent goodness of humanity when properly guided. He reads psychology books, plans outings for Rufus, and argues that morality is a matter of social adjustment. Yet his “good works” are performed without genuine empathy. He uses Rufus as a project to

validate his own self-image as a saviour. O'Connor, a devout Catholic, suggests that without acknowledgment of sin and divine grace, human efforts at redemption are hollow and even destructive.

Pride as the Greatest Sin

Sheppard's pride is almost infinite. He sees the world as a puzzle he can solve with the right approach. When Rufus refuses to conform—stealing again, making obscene gestures, quoting scripture to mock his mentor—Sheppard doubles down, convinced that his method will eventually work. This is not the humble charity of Christianity; it is the arrogance of a man who believes he has no need of salvation himself. O'Connor reserves her most savage irony for Sheppard, whose name means "shepherd," yet who fails to tend to the one lamb closest to home: his own son.

Parental Neglect and the Cry of the Child

Norton, Sheppard's son, is a ghost in the household. He is described as pale, quiet, and grieving. His mother's death is barely mentioned by Sheppard, who expects the boy to be "reasonable" about his loss. The story draws a terrible parallel: Sheppard pours his energy into saving the "worthy" poor child (Rufus) while ignoring the desperate need of his own flesh and blood. The tragedy that befalls Norton is not an accident but a direct consequence of his father's emotional abandonment. This theme resonates powerfully with contemporary readers, reminding us that charity must begin at home.

Character Analysis: The Lame and the Self-Righteous

Sheppard: The Blind Shepherd

Sheppard is one of O'Connor's most complex characters because he is not malicious; he is sincere in his belief that he is doing good. This sincerity makes his blindness all the more tragic. He speaks in clichés of progress and potential, never recognising that his own soul is crippled. His name, ironic in the extreme, highlights his failure. He cannot see that Rufus's stubbornness is a form of truth, and that Norton's silence is a cry. By the story's end, Sheppard experiences a moment of revelation, but it comes too late—a hallmark of O'Connor's vision of grace that is often painful and irreversible.

Rufus Johnson: The Grotesque Prophet

Rufus Johnson is a classic O'Connor grotesque: a teenager with a club foot, a prison record, and an encyclopedic knowledge of the Bible. He is defiant, manipulative, and often vicious, yet he is the only character who possesses genuine spiritual insight. He proclaims that he is a liar and a thief, but that Jesus died for his sins. He refuses to be "saved" by Sheppard's psychology because he knows that his problem is not social maladjustment—it is sin. Rufus's lameness is literal, but O'Connor inverts the expected metaphor: the "lame" boy is spiritually whole, while the seemingly able-bodied father is spiritually crippled. Rufus's famous line, "The lame shall enter first," is simultaneously a biblical promise and a threat.

Norton: The Innocent Sacrifice

Norton, the innocent child caught between these two powerful forces, is largely silent for most of the story. He observes, grieves, and eventually acts. His evolution from a passive victim to a desperate seeker is quietly devastating. When he turns to his father for comfort about heaven and his mother, Sheppard dismisses the questions with rationalist platitudes. Norton's eventual fate—triggered by Rufus's twisted taunts and Sheppard's continued neglect—is the story's ultimate indictment of a love that serves the ego rather than the other.

Religious Symbolism and the Meaning of "The Lame Shall Enter First"

The title itself is a direct allusion to the Bible. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus says: "When thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind: and thou shalt be blessed; for they cannot recompense

thee" (Luke 14:13-14). In the story, the "lame" is Rufus Johnson, but the twist is that his lameness is not merely physical—it is a badge of his dependence on grace. Sheppard believes he is the one who invites the lame in, but he does so out of pride. The true host, O'Connor implies, is God, who welcomes the broken and outcast into His kingdom. The story uses foot imagery repeatedly: Sheppard buys Rufus a new corrective shoe, attempting to "fix" his deformity, but Rufus refuses to wear it. The club foot becomes a symbol of an unyielding truth that cannot be corrected by human mechanical means.

Furthermore, Sheppard's house is a symbol of his controlled, rational world. Rufus disrupts it with chaos and scripture. The telescope that Sheppard gives Norton, intended to teach him about the stars and science, becomes an instrument of horror in the final scene. O'Connor layers her symbols with precision, never allowing the reader to escape the weight of the story's theological argument: that the first shall be last, and the last shall be first.

O'Connor's Literary Style: Violence as Grace

Flannery O'Connor famously wrote that "violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace." In "The Lame Shall Enter First," the violence is psychological until the final, visceral shock. O'Connor's prose is spare and precise, with a dark humour that undercuts every tender moment. She refuses to sentimentalise her characters. Sheppard's final realisation, when it comes, is not a gentle epiphany but a brutal awakening that mirrors the biblical cry, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

The story also employs the Southern Gothic tradition of the grotesque. Rufus's club foot, his history of stealing, his lewdness—all mark him as a social outcast. Yet in O'Connor's world, the grotesque is often a vessel for the sacred. The reader is unsettled because we are forced to side, at least partially, with the unlikable Rufus against the seemingly reasonable Sheppard. This moral inversion is a signature O'Connor move: she makes the reader uncomfortable with conventional charity, forcing a deeper examination of what it means to truly love one's neighbour.

Critical Reception and Enduring Legacy

Since its publication, "The Lame Shall Enter First" has been recognised as one of O'Connor's most harrowing works. Critics have debated whether the story is overly bleak or whether it represents the peak of her theological artistry. Some have argued that Sheppard is too flatly a straw man for secularism, while others praise O'Connor for her unyielding vision of a world that cannot be fixed by human effort alone. The story continues to be a staple of American literature courses, not only for its literary merit but for its provocative questions about morality, religion, and the limits of empathy.

In an age when self-help, therapy, and social reform often replace religious frameworks, "The Lame Shall Enter First" remains disturbingly relevant. It challenges the reader to ask: Are our efforts to "save" others truly for their benefit, or do they serve our own need to feel powerful? And what happens when we ignore the most vulnerable among us while chasing an abstract ideal of reform?

Conclusion: A Story That Lingers

Flannery O'Connor The Lame Shall Enter First is not a story that offers comfort. It is a story that demands introspection. Through the tragedy of Sheppard, Norton, and Rufus, O'Connor dramatises the terrifying gap between human goodwill and divine grace. The lame enter first, but they do so through a narrow gate, and not everyone who tries to help them will be able to follow. For the careful reader, this story is both a warning and a strange kind of hope: that redemption belongs to those who know they are broken, not to those who think they are whole. O'Connor's masterpiece endures because it refuses to let us look away from our own lameness, inviting us—painfully—to see ourselves in the light of a truth we would rather deny.

Related Articles

- **Are James Blunt And Emily Blunt Related**
  URL: https://signage.openstack.org/are-james-blunt-and-emily-blunt-related.pdf
- **Was Remember Me Based On A True Story**
  URL: https://signage.openstack.org/was-remember-me-based-on-a-true-story.pdf
- **Ess Employee Self Service Costco**
  URL: https://signage.openstack.org/ess-employee-self-service-costco.pdf
- **The Case For Christianity By Cs Lewis**
  URL: https://signage.openstack.org/the-case-for-christianity-by-cs-lewis.pdf

TOPIC INDEX

#flannery • #connor • #lame • #shall • #enter

DIGITAL EDITION

flannery-o-connor-the-lame-shall-enter-first

DIGITAL EDITION

flannery-o-connor-the-lame-shall-enter-first

DIGITAL EDITION

flannery-o-connor-the-lame-shall-enter-first

DIGITAL EDITION

flannery-o-connor-the-lame-shall-enter-first