ABSTRACT

CAMERON LEE WINTER. Flannery O'Connor's “The Lame Shall Enter First” and the Conflicting Ideologies of Space-Age America. (Under the direction of Professor Michael Grimwood.)

Scholars investigating “The Lame Shall Enter First” have not adequately conceptualized the character Norton as anything more than a sacrifice that prompts Sheppard’s moment of grace. Critics treat Norton’s death as a side effect of Sheppard’s imbecility as a father or Johnson’s malicious influence. But, Norton, far from being a passive object of the story, actively participates in the philosophical conflict at its center. Instead of being a inert fixture like Bishop in The Violent Bear It Away, Norton attempts to merge the religiosity of Johnson and the secular humanism of Sheppard. O’Connor attacks a particular fashion of secular humanism during the period of this text’s composition: the heroic, optimistic rhetoric of the Space Age. Sheppard’s space-race rhetoric implicates Norton’s suicide as a consequence of his misunderstanding of Sheppard’s and Johnson’s philosophies. The conflict between Sheppard and Johnson exhibits two dueling ideologies to the impressionable Norton, who attempts to be both astronaut and elect, space man and saved. Norton’s confused application of the two ideologies transfigures him into a darkly symbolic rocket man through his suicide. An analysis of Sheppard’s space-race rhetoric and its secular humanist foundations, the Christian doctrines of Rufus Johnson, and Norton’s development throughout the text, O’Connor’s “The Lame Shall Enter First” exhibits the abortive union of secularism and Christianity.