



The Lame Shall Enter First

Flannery O'Connor

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Summary

The main character Sheppard is an atheistic rationalist who is unsympathetic with the grief of his young son, Norton, despite the death of Norton's mother only a year before the story takes place. Ironically, Sheppard believes that helping other people improve their lives is the greatest virtue in life, and he is frustrated with his inability to help Norton's grief and resulting foibles. Sheppard tells Norton that his mother is dead, and no longer exists.

Eventually, Sheppard invites Rufus Johnson, a fourteen-year-old juvenile delinquent, to live with them against Norton's wishes. Sheppard met Johnson while volunteering at a juvenile incarceration facility, and desperately wants to help Johnson turn his life around. Johnson holds Sheppard in contempt and strongly believes in good and evil, but believes that he himself is evil and resists all of the naive attempts by Sheppard to help him. Against Sheppard's wishes, Johnson tells Norton that his mother is in heaven above the earth, and he will only see her again if he dies as a child before he is corrupted. The story ends with Johnson being taken away by the police for a burglary and with Sheppard then finding Norton hanged dead from an attic rafter above the telescope that Sheppard purchased to help Johnson expand his horizons.

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