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GOOD LUCK, BAD LUCK IN RON RASH'S "CHEROKEE"

Good and bad luck play an extremely important role in human lives, and yet the contemporary technocratic societies make every effort to marginalize it. The only exception that is widely considered to be acceptable is the gambling industry, which cashes in on people's atavistic instincts to risk all their belongings on the turn of a card, the toss of a coin, or a throw of the dice. In fiction, the introduction of luck allows a deeper insight into human behavior and through that an attempt at revealing at least some mysteries of human existence. Ron Rash, an Appalachian storyteller and poet, very often explores these mysteries, occasionally adopting a point of view close to that of existentialist philosophers and fiction writers. At the same time, he is regularly compared to Flannery O'Connor, whose mastery of unexpected turns in narratives showing human fates and destinies is unparalleled. This article will focus on Rash's "Cherokee," in which good luck and bad luck play a prominent part, and will demonstrate that this story uses a strategy known from O'Connor's short fiction and masterfully combines it with the existentialist reasoning of another doyen of southern writing, Walker Percy.¹ This mixture, applied to his own environment, enables Rash to achieve results that are powerful and original.

1. Using the word "existentialist," I have in mind what Percy said in a 1984 interview with Elżbieta Oleksy. In this interview he admitted that existentialism is far beyond its zenith and hopelessly out of fashion; it "has gotten to be a bad word. I don't know any serious philosophers who ever use it any more and I don't know any serious writers who would call themselves existentialists. The word is used so loosely now that it means almost nothing" ("A Talk" 73). Nevertheless, as he himself draws from the existentialists profusely, adopting especially their recognition that it is impossible to grasp individual human beings through purely scientific methods ("A Talk" 73), I decided to run the risk of being outdated.

In “Cherokee,” originally published in 2012 in *Ecotone*, a literary magazine published by the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, and reprinted in the 2013 collection *Nothing Gold Can Stay*, a young married couple, Danny and Lisa, face the repossessing of their new truck by a local bank; they are not able to make their installment payment and decide to visit a casino to win the sum of one thousand dollars that they need from slot machines. Even though the chances are low, they miraculously manage to obtain the money and, in addition to that, they get acquainted with a fellow-gambler, who pays for their night in the luxurious casino hotel. Most of the time, the author looks over Lisa’s shoulder and reads her mind, doing it nevertheless in the most unobtrusive, hidden way. The title of the story refers to the fact that the area in which the story is set used to be Cherokee hunting grounds, and today the Cherokee operate casinos and run profitable tourist attractions there (Morgan xii).

In the gradually increasing oeuvre of critical volumes and articles on Rash, “Cherokee” has been neglected so far. John Lang mentions it in a single sentence as another example of the stories in which Rash “writes sensitively and movingly about the working-class people” (118)—a statement that he chooses as an argument against accusations of pessimism aimed at Rash by reviewers. In her recent monograph on Rash, Frédérique Spill does not mention the story at all, not even in her interview with Rash on short story writing. Unlike the scholars, reviewers do mention the story but they do not go beyond the surface. For example, Troy Jollimore of the *Chicago Tribune*, who considers the whole collection in which it appeared to be a disappointing venture, mainly for its focus on “the dark side of existence,” calls “Cherokee” its “most optimistic story,” even though he later characterizes it as a tale of avoiding destruction “by embracing pessimism.” In his opinion, there are just “two kinds of luck in the world of these stories,” including “Cherokee”: “the kind that’s bad and the kind that doesn’t last” (Jollimore).

GOOD LUCK, BAD LUCK, AND THE MYSTERIES OF GAMBLING

At the beginning of “Cherokee,” Danny is introduced as a boyish, slightly naïve young man who has changed his behavior after his wedding day, turning from a rowdy macho into a responsible, hardworking husband. Even though he works at a concrete plant and can hardly make ends meet, he constantly believes that when he takes a risk, “the next time, unlike the last, he’d somehow get away with it” (*Nothing* 53). The risk he has taken this time is buying an expensive Ranger at a local Ford dealership, mostly to counterbalance his shabby living conditions in a flat with “old cigarette burns on the carpet and cracks in the ceiling, windows with views of more brick walls” (53). His wife Lisa is more skeptical, knowing that “all it would take was a bit of bad luck—

sickness or accident or layoff—to lose the truck,” and yet she keeps “those fears for herself” (52). Soon the bad luck comes, even though not in such a devastating way as Lisa suggested: Danny is not fired but his hours at the plant are cut.

When Danny and Lisa set out on the trip to the casino, Danny makes sure to have with him “all the good luck” he can find: “a green rabbit’s foot clipped on his belt loop” and “a silver four-leaf clover dangling from his neck” (51). When Lisa asks Danny whether they will have to drive the truck to the bank, or people from the bank will come for it, Danny replies: “We could win. . . . People do all the time” (51). A billboard near the entrance to the Cherokee Reservation lures visitors with “*There is something for everyone*” (54; Rash’s italics), and yet in the casino the advertised big choice is limited for them to one option only—the slot machines, the sole game that does not require the purchase of a player’s card.

In his 2007 book *Jackpot Nation*, Richard Hoffer shows that slot machines are one of the least rewarding ways of gambling. First, in slot machines “the chances of hitting it big . . . are about the same whether you play the game or you don’t” (134) and, second, they are (contrary to what happens with, for example, card games) “entirely independent of any action you take” (131). As he witnessed, when couples come to a casino, it is usually the women who prefer a slot machine, “the dumbest appliance of chance in the joint,” while men go “about the real business of bringing down the house” (126). Subsequently, Hoffer nevertheless offers a wider context, adding that those who deliberately choose games where no decision-making is needed are true believers in good luck, and detects more of them among people from poor regions. In his opinion, slot machines are preferred by those who have faced numerous hardships during their lives; if a living creature “is exposed to a lot of unpredictable environments its whole life, it might come to prefer riskier choices, where the chance of a larger payoff is possible, especially with modest investments” (134).

Hoffer’s reasoning helps explain why slot machine gamblers are very often working-class, with a very limited income. The poor, albeit striving, Appalachian couple is a perfect target for this kind of gambling. Danny does not anticipate that he can trick the machine; in an unemotional way he inserts banknotes into the slot and watches what will happen with curiosity. For both, it is a last attempt, a duty they must fulfill and do not expect much from. Danny admits that he was in the casino twice before and lost both times, and even when he faintly assures himself and his wife that “third time’s the charm” (*Nothing* 55), there “is hope but also enough doubt in his voice to make it a real question” (56). Lisa, who could hardly “believe it could happen” and only touched their rabbit’s foot obediently (54), cannot understand how the game is played and what all the winning combinations are—Danny can. Yet, when Lisa declines to try it herself, saying “I wouldn’t know what I was doing,” he

admits, “Like I do” (56). As soon as they start winning, Lisa, turning now for protection to superstitions more than her husband does, is careful not to chase their luck away. When she asks whether they are ahead, and they immediately lose in the next round, she “can’t help but think just saying they were ahead had jinxed the spin” (57).

Relying on superstition, Danny and Lisa illustrate how old magical beliefs infiltrate the era of modern technologies. In his 2003 book *Something or Nothing: Luck in America*, Jackson Lears points out a major paradox characterizing American culture: it is shaped, he argues, by the clash between the culture of control, stemming from British-American Protestantism, and the culture of chance, “largely a product of African, Native American, and European Catholic traditions” (17). These cultures seem to be contradictory but, upon close inspection, they are not, as even the culture of control that “became an ethic of human mastery over fate” is “rooted in a Christian tradition that began by emphasizing human helplessness in the face of divine omnipotence” (17). The culture of control has been ruling since the beginning of the twentieth century, with its counterpart surviving only under special “local circumstances” (19), fueled by traditions, habits, and manners in certain areas—at this point, Lears explicitly mentions “a Southern code of honor” (19)—but in the 1970s “subcultures of chance resurfaced in the revival of legalized casinos” (21).

According to some philosophers, chance and luck are different, albeit close concepts. For example, in his monograph on the relationship between luck and knowledge Duncan Pritchard can see the difference in the significance or non-significance of an event for the agent concerned: if it is significant, or, at least, “would be significant, were the agent to be availed of the relevant facts” (132), then the event is lucky; if not, it is mere chance. A distinction can also be made between luck and accident: while accident is totally beyond an agent’s control, luck requires a deliberate activity (126), such as visiting a casino, choosing a particular game, or betting on selected numbers.

Psychologists, on the other hand, ask whether people can influence their luck. Richard Wiseman, the author of several popular books on the presence or absence of luck in human lives, bluntly asserts in the introductory chapter of his 2003 volume *The Luck Factor*: “Luck makes a mockery of even our best intentions. It has the power to change everything, within seconds, for better or worse. Any time, any place, and without warning” (17). Then, he nevertheless suggests that there might be ways to invite luck into our lives: people just need to think positively, as “seemingly chance opportunities are the result of lucky people’s psychological make-up” (38) and “being in the right place at the right time is actually all about being in the right state of mind” (39). Even though Wiseman’s tautological explanation that lucky people attract good luck, while unlucky people are magnets for bad luck, is not very useful in an analysis of “Cherokee,” it suggests one relevant question: are Danny and Lisa lucky?

When Wiseman writes that those “who were lucky in their financial lives also reported being lucky in their home lives” (20), he obviously connects luck with domestic happiness. Still, to rephrase the question: are Danny and Lisa happy together? They have been married for three years but they are childless and cannot afford to go out except on Saturdays. Their life involves much work and little fun and the only thing that makes them proud is their new Ranger. It is more than a vehicle; it is a fetish and a symbol of class status for them. Instead of going to church, or leaving for a trip in the truck, Danny “vacuums the interior with a Dustbuster, then washes the exterior” every Sunday (*Nothing* 52); then, when they do drive the truck during weekdays, it feels “nice to finally have a vehicle whose radio and heater worked, that didn’t risk stalling at every stop sign” (53). Lisa knows that she married a man who really loves her, is not violent, and even quit smoking and spending time with his friends, but instead of calling it good luck, she takes his sacrifices for granted. Wiseman notices that people often do not recognize their good luck, as sometimes what initially seemed to be bad luck turns out to be good luck, and vice versa. Still, he continues to claim that “lucky people’s dreams and ambitions often become a reality, whilst unlucky people rarely obtain what they want from life” (96), and even specifies this rule for activities such as gambling: “Lucky people are convinced that these sorts of unpredictable and uncontrollable events will consistently work out for them” (107).

As Lears explains, among gamblers “good luck still happens on its own terms—obeying its own mysterious (or nonexistent) laws, without regard for the merits or demerits of the lucky person,” which “brings a dizzying sense of release from the grip of moral convention” (23). In a casino, people feel liberated and equal, as there is no difference between those who deserve to win and those who do not: especially in cheap games, the starting line is the same for everybody. The joy of freedom, not directly related to success, also resonates on the billboards Danny and Lisa pass: “On them, winners cup hands to gather spills of coins . . . and even the empty-handed laugh and smile” (*Nothing* 53).

Yet, under certain circumstances a gambling experience can turn into a mystical one. Lears has observed that in their memoirs gamblers frequently express “a longing to transcend the realm of money-worship” and exert instead “an effort to glimpse some coherence in the cosmos” (23). The gambling industry offers people “a counterpoint to the arrogance of ultimate explanation” (22), that is, a huge portion of uncertainty. To sell gambling opportunities better, there is a “tendency to sanctify the secular” (22); modern casinos look like cathedrals to which people make pilgrimages. Hoffer describes the impression made by a glowing hall of computerized slot machines on a visitor in a similar way: “The full effect of several thousand fully lit, mostly animated slot machines in full ‘attract’ mode, clamoring for attention like so many computerized orphans, reminded you of . . . a religious experience” (128-29).

In “Cherokee,” the casino and the adjoining hotel “loom, blocking out even the mountains” (*Nothing* 55), which helps customers forget for several hours both where they are and where they come from. After some time, Lisa notices that there are no clocks or windows in the casino: “A person could be down here and not know if it was morning or afternoon or night or even what day it was” (57-58). In this timeless environment, superstitious beliefs are transformed into faith, the process replaying in fast motion the historical development from the pagan era of diviners and conjurers to the times of orthodox Christianity, when, in Lears’s words, manna, the Biblical food sent from heaven, “was no longer materialized in objects” but “etherealized into grace and dispensed solely by God” (17).

FROM SUPERSTITION TO GRACE THROUGH FLANNERY O’CONNOR

Grace is one of the basic concepts in Christianity. Even though it is used in the New Testament with many different meanings, some of them secular, in the Apostle Paul’s epistles it repeatedly appears in several relevant contexts, which, put together, form its broad definition. From the Pauline perspective, grace “is God’s way of salvation, totally unearned” and comes “to sinners, not to those who merit God’s acceptance,” and its experience “is conditional upon human response,” as it “can be rejected or accepted” (Polhill).

Lears connects grace with luck, claiming that to “court grace, luck, and fortune through serious play is to circumvent what passes for common sense and seek to spring the trap of the predictable” (24). Of course, he is not writing about grace as understood by the Puritans, who held that “the experience of grace must be an inner transformation, divorced from all material artifacts” (18), but turns instead to William James, the founder of pragmatism.

James does not use the word “grace,” but addresses the topic when he connects chance with unearned and surprising gifts, including material ones. In his 1884 essay “The Dilemma of Determinism,” James uses “chance” in two different meanings: as a synonym for “hope” and for “luck.” While in the former meaning chance is for him “the vital air which lets the world live” (591), in the latter “the idea of chance is, at bottom, exactly the same thing as the idea of gift—the one being simply a disparaging, and the other a eulogistic, name for anything on which we have no effective *claim*” (576; James’s italics). James, however, continues: “And whether the world be the better or the worse for having either chances or gifts in it will depend altogether on *what* these uncertain and unclaimable things turn out to be” (576; James’s italics). Grace, being a gift from God to an individual human being, is, from a Christian viewpoint, highly desirable and positively life-changing for the individual. Its power does not extend to the whole world; it nevertheless has a deep influence

on the microcosm around the individual who willingly received it, and this influence does not always have to be positive.

The concept of grace was vital for Flannery O'Connor, whom Rash frequently names as his major influence.² Understandably, all the scholars who have compared Rash with O'Connor touch on religion, even though they focus on different affinities between these two authors. Martha Greene Eads, for whom Rash's landscape in *Nothing Gold Can Stay* is even more Christ-abandoned than O'Connor's, claims that, like O'Connor, "Rash has also demonstrated a keen awareness of the religious influences on his characters, but Christianity does little or nothing in either writer's stories to shield those characters from . . . suffering" (122). In addition, she claims that in Rash's stories Christ is "conspicuously absent" (124) and his characters "find no help from God but discover their own capacity to respond with human grace to suffering," while O'Connor always offers her protagonists "Christ's grace" (135). In another article from *Summoning the Dead*, Jimmy Dean Smith concentrates more on both writers' descent "into region . . . where mystery reveals itself" through their use of the southern woods as a liminal *topos* (53), but at the same time he recognizes the important role of religious symbolism and Edenic imagery in Rash's short fiction.

O'Connor herself complained that her contemporaries did not have "a very sharp eye for the almost imperceptible intrusions of grace" (*Mystery* 112), and at the same time she claimed: "There is a moment in every great story in which the presence of grace can be felt as it waits to be accepted or rejected, even though the reader may not recognize this moment" (*Mystery* 118). Rash's "Cherokee" meets O'Connor's requirement perfectly: grace occupies a prominent place in the story, and yet remains invisible for readers who perceive the story as a narrative about good luck.

In the gambling sanctuary, Danny and Lisa strike up an acquaintanceship with two men playing at the slot machines next to them. The older one, called Perk, with his left hand missing and the inscription *Vietnam Vet* on his cap, has only two dollars on the credit line, but "he seems more amused than angry when it slips to one" (*Nothing* 57). When Danny leaves his position at the slot machine to get a drink, Perk starts to talk with Lisa, asking where they are from and telling her that he is from a neighboring town. His joviality becomes even more intrusive when he asks Danny to let him bet ten dollars on his machine with the explanation, "I just want a touch of luck, just so I can remember what it feels like" (59), and later to let him rub Danny's rabbit's foot. Even though

2. Rash has repeated many times that he follows the tradition of Faulkner, O'Connor, and Welty of regional writing with universal appeal. Still, he singled out O'Connor when he confessed in an interview: "Actually where I do most of my writing is in my office, and I have a little photograph of Flannery O'Connor glaring down at me, keeping me honest" ("Ron Rash, Redux" 160).

Danny and Lisa are reluctant to allow him to do what he wishes, obviously fearing that it will bring them bad luck, their winning streak is not broken and they even seem to extend their luck to their new acquaintance. When Perk leaves the slot machine area, presumably to try his luck at poker, he bids the couple farewell with “Maybe one day I can do you all a good turn too” (60). After he returns in an hour with the money he won, he gives them a room key, announcing that he has paid for their bed and breakfast at the casino hotel. Danny wants to refuse the gift politely, but Perk says: “Figure it a bit more luck then” (61). Immediately after Perk’s second exit, Danny and Lisa win exactly the amount they need.

From one point of view, Perk can be interpreted as an accelerator of Danny and Lisa’s good luck, who at first put them to a test, which they passed, as they were willing to share their luck with a stranger. However, upon closer inspection, Perk’s identity becomes open to different allegorical meanings. As Lisa notices, Perk wears a gold watch in the casino, whose owners do everything to create an illusion of timelessness. This detail suggests his being in control all the time. Having only one arm, he might even be a personification of the slot machines, called “one-armed bandits” in their mechanical prehistory. When he reminds Lisa of this old-time term, he adds, “You reckon that’s the why of me not winning?” (58), indicating an affirmative answer. A machine never wins, and neither does a *deus ex machina*. However, it would be a simplification to read the character of Perk as the ghost in the slot machine. Offering the room key, Perk also tempts the couple in the manner of the biblical serpent: the longer the young couple stay at the casino, the greater the chance is that they will lose what they won. As in the Bible, it is the woman who is more vulnerable, even though she can see her own dreams of their further gambling success as if they were in Danny’s head: “He’s thinking about a year’s rent paid up, enough money set aside to start a family. . . . Lisa knows he’s thinking these things because she is too” (62).

In fact, Danny seems to be free of such thoughts. In the very first paragraph of the story, Lisa “remembers a story about a magic lamp that, once rubbed, grants three wishes,” but Danny “would settle for just one” (51). As soon as they win the sum they need, Danny’s voice becomes “soft and calm, as if afraid he might startle the machine and cause the numbers to rearrange” (62). When Lisa tells him that they need one thousand dollars, but won only nine hundred and sixty, he reminds her of the money they already have and resolutely pushes the cash-out button. He would prefer to go home immediately but Lisa wants to spend a free “minivacation” in luxury and enjoy “fancy-colored drinks” in the local bar (64). He sticks to draft beer as if he were in his favorite tavern and drinks very little, while Lisa, who optimistically perceives his glass as “half full” (64), not half empty, is ordering one drink after another, temptingly repeating the sentence she used to utter with a large amount of skepticism at an earlier time: “Third time’s the charm, right” (64). From their bar stools,

Danny and Lisa can see people leaving the slot machine area, most of them losing everything, with only occasional winners. From Lisa's perspective, Danny is watching the players, but whether "with yearning or just curiosity she cannot tell" (65). However, it is she, focusing mainly on those who cash out higher sums than they did, who counts thousands in her mind. Finally, Danny takes the drunken Lisa into their room, lets her sleep, and does not touch the money. At that time he is not like the biblical Adam, who takes a bite of the forbidden fruit, but rather a Christ-figure who resisted Satan's temptations.

When Thomas Ærvold Bjerre asked Rash in 2006 whether he was a religious man, the writer responded positively, and yet he confessed that he had "gone through periods of skepticism" ("Natural" 75). Six years earlier, in an interview with Jack Shuler for the *South Carolina Review*, he admitted that one of the most important themes for him was religion, but he was not using it with a plan in his mind: "Like Flannery O'Connor, I think my work is Christ-haunted. . . . Sometimes it's Pagan, sometimes it's Christian. You know, what I find fascinating, what I love to write about is the kind of fusion you have in the Appalachian mountains" ("An Interview" 21). "Cherokee" also illustrates very well Frédérique Spill's opinion that "Rash's fiction strives to build bridges between two alien worlds that often have trouble finding a common ground, a common language," that is, myth and modern times ("*Burning Bright*" 253-54), and the related idea of hers that he "is a writer of ambivalence" (*Radiance* 160).

While in the first part of "Cherokee" pagan imagery prevails, from the time when Perk touches the rabbit's foot, it is never mentioned again or even linked with their winnings. The region where superstition has the upper hand becomes only a pretty view from the fancy room's window: the native Appalachian Mountains are "turning bluer and bluer as they stretch westward into Tennessee" (*Nothing* 63). After two drinks Lisa feels "good to be away from everything familiar," considering their day in the casino "the best day of her and Danny's life together, better than the night they got engaged or their first Christmas, even their wedding day" (64). This is a confession of her preference for material assets over spiritual values; Christmas is obviously a mere holiday for her, and calling Danny "my lucky boy" (65) betrays the fact that she never asks where their unearned gift comes from. While Danny evolves from superstition to a deeper understanding of life's mysteries, Lisa takes the opposite direction, from healthy skepticism to a belief in magic, the heresy Paul Tillich warned against in *The New Being*, even though he was writing not about grace but about the related topic of God's miraculous cures; in this context, he was "worried about the abuse of religious healing . . . or about its distortion into magic and superstition" (44). Danny, to whose thoughts readers do not gain access, acts with much more awe after he has won the amount they needed, and from his later behavior it becomes obvious that he has humbly accepted the grace that was offered, recognizing it at the same time as an exceptional and non-recurring event.

In her 2015 interview, Frédérique Spill told Rash: “[M]y feeling is that, unlike O’Connor or Welty, you are not such a fervent practitioner of ironical twists. . . . My impression is that most of the time in your stories, surprises and revelations are more likely to be found in small details” (*Radiance* 206). She names only one exception to the rule, “A Servant of History,” and I will try to prove that “Cherokee” is another one. A good example of O’Connor’s use of a concluding ironical twist can be found in her “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” where the very last sentence, “It’s no pleasure in life” (*Collected Works* 153), changes the perspective of the whole story. The character who utters the sentence, The Misfit, an escaped convict, whose life motto is “No pleasure but meanness” (*Collected Works* 152), orders his two henchmen to kill a family of five, including three children, and, after a brief talk about Jesus Christ and resurrection, murders the last member of the family, the grandmother. There are multiple interpretations of the story, and some of them were so unacceptable for the author that she decided to give a clue to her readers: “I don’t want to equate the Misfit with the devil. I prefer to think that, however unlikely this may seem, the old lady’s gesture, like the mustard-seed, will grow to be a great crow-filled tree in the Misfit’s heart, and will be enough of a pain to him there to turn him into the prophet he was meant to become” (*Mystery* 112-13). The gesture she mentions is the grandmother’s last sentence to The Misfit, “Why you’re one of my babies. You’re one of my children” (*Collected Works* 152). O’Connor considers it “the right gesture” and consequently explains her reason for using excessive violence in this story and elsewhere: it “is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace” (*Mystery* 112). Such an explanation moves the shift in the narrative several paragraphs back but the real surprise does come in the last six words of the story: The Misfit realizes that he will never see the resurrection with which he is obsessed (why else would he have the family, which posed no danger for him, killed, if not to give God an opportunity to show him the act of raising the dead?), and suddenly, within a second, changes from an agnostic waiting for a proof of God’s existence into an atheist. Here is the irony Spill writes about: The Misfit may turn into a prophet, as O’Connor claims, yet not of faith, but of disbelief.³

Rash’s “Cherokee” also ends with a very surprising twist; its last sentence shows Lisa, who discovers in the morning that her husband did not spend the money they won, stepping out of an elevator and walking to the hotel’s dining room “toward a man who knows as well as she does that their luck couldn’t last” (*Nothing* 66).⁴ Rash works masterfully with his readers’ expectations. When

3. Is it really mere coincidence that in “Cherokee” Lisa watches the odometer slip to 56240 miles (52), while in O’Connor’s “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” the family leaves Atlanta “with the mileage on the car at 55890” (*Collected Works* 138)? What do the additional 350 miles signify?

4. The only analysis of the story’s conclusion so far has appeared in a teacher’s blog as a

the couple decide to try their luck in the casino, the only logical expectation is that they will lose everything: as Hoffer points out, the “random number generator, which is producing outcomes by the nanosecond . . . makes sure of that” (131). Even when they are winning, the odds are against their success, and any prolongation of the time that they spend in the casino reinforces the certainty that they will leave empty-handed. It has a psychological effect on readers who, to consider themselves lucky despite their failures and to raise their self-esteem, need to see the bad luck of their neighbors; even Wiseman, an advocate of a positive approach to life, admits that “lucky people tend to lessen the impact of their ill fortune by comparing themselves to people who have been unluckier than themselves” (142). Yet, this assumption is frustrated again and again, until the last sentence, which, despite the cajoling of popular psychologists like Wiseman, clearly shows that to be lucky does not mean to be happy.

This design echoes O'Connor's craving for “an action that is totally unexpected, yet totally believable . . . this is always an action which indicates that grace has been offered” (*Mystery* 118), but also marks an important difference between O'Connor and Rash. While O'Connor's stories, such as “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” meet readers' expectations until the very end and then suddenly let them down, Rash keeps them up throughout the story without giving them their due before ending the story with a comparable effect. His mastery in this respect might be the result of his parallel career as a poet: in poetry, it is the expectation of a rhythmic pattern that makes a poem, not the real presence of such a pattern.

In the final paragraph, luck does not relate to gambling but to Lisa's mental layout. Instead of her being happy that Danny abstained from further gambling, something “shifts inside her with an audible click” (*Nothing* 66), and a feeling of alienation sets in which will influence her subsequent decision, hinted at in the final paragraph. The unvoiced decision is the “crucial decision which is either the cause or the consequence of the critical experience made by the characters at the moment Rash chooses to shed light on them” that Spill mentions in one of her articles on Rash's short fiction (“*Burning Bright*” 245). O'Connor called unexpected behavioral shifts, such as the one Lisa passes through, “lines of spiritual motion” (*Mystery* 113), but to explain them better I will turn to the ideas of Walker Percy, a southern Christian existentialist, and his Danish predecessor, Søren Kierkegaard.

response to a student's query. The teacher renounces the student's opinion that Danny and Lisa “are better off at the end of the story, more mature, and we can hope, more appreciative of love, of the immaterial things that make life worthwhile,” and suggests instead that the ending makes “Cherokee” an “open story,” with the option that “they may be preparing to continue to gamble together.” At the same time, however, he pinpoints the phrase “their luck couldn't last,” in opposition to “their luck wouldn't last,” admitting that “there is no clear indication” that they will return to the slot machines (May). Both opinions miss the ironical and at the same time sinister note in the conclusion.

In Rash's stories, every occurrence of good luck automatically presupposes bad luck. In "Twenty-Six Days," working-class parents anxiously expect the return of their daughter from a mission in Afghanistan, where she went in order to receive tuition from the army's college fund, but the closer the date of her return comes, the more they fear that she has been "lucky so long that the luck's due to run out" (*Nothing* 105). It is the same as when they get lucky at traffic lights—after "three greens" there inevitably comes "one red" (102). Similarly, "The Magic Bus" introduces a farmer's family who expect that their son will not return from Vietnam because two local boys have already been killed there and death "always comes in threes" (157); the soldier's sister, explaining the family's concern to strangers, bluntly states that "everyone around here always expects the worst" (157). In "Those Who Are Dead Are Only Now Forgiven," poor people in the drug-plagued town of Canton, North Carolina, live "a life where checkbooks never quite balanced and repo men and pawnbrokers loomed one turn of bad luck away" and they endure it "with an impatient fatalism" (135). A pawnshop owner from "Back of Beyond" notices "a blue four-leaf clover tattooed" on the forearm of a young female drug addict, looking at the same time into her eyes and seeing "no indication luck had found her" (*Something* 79). When in the short story "Into the Gorge" the protagonist finds the valuable ginseng his father planted fifty years ago on his property, which is now a part of a National Park, and tells himself that he has been "damn lucky" (100), bad luck strikes almost immediately, as a ranger suddenly appears to arrest him.

Sill, "Cherokee" proceeds to a similar ending along a different path. In this story, Rash shows the turn of fortune without fatalism; the blow does not come from an uncaring universe, but from fellow-human beings. There are two major paradoxes in the behavior of people who otherwise claim that they wish everybody well and seemingly strive for their own harmony and happiness. First, people cannot bear other people's good luck and do everything to prevent them from standing out in the crowd; as I suggested earlier, they need to see their neighbors' failure to become happy. Second, they even feel alienated when everything in their own lives is fine, and secretly crave a change for the worse. According to Walker Percy, these paradoxes are among the main concerns of "religious" writers (he systematically puts "religious" within quotation marks in this context) who are exploring "the radical questions of man's identity and his relation to God or to God's absence" (*Message* 108). From this characteristic it becomes obvious that a good "religious" writer is an existentialist.

When Bjerre, during his 2006 interview with Rash, commented on the shortage of contemporary southern writers who would place religion in the forefront of their fiction, Rash named Percy (who had died sixteen years earlier), and aptly noted: "But he's a believer, I think, more in the European tradition, like Kierkegaard and Gabriel Marcel" ("Natural" 76). In the same interview,

however, even before Percy was mentioned, Rash placed himself “more in Kierkegaard’s camp than Jerry Falwell’s” (“Natural” 75), preferring the Danish pre-existentialist philosopher to the extremely conservative Southern Baptist pastor. In another interview, he nevertheless expressed his unwillingness to use religion to preach or teach: “I don’t do it consciously, but a lot of my imagery is religious. I’m not saying it in a didactic way, but it just seems to be central to my writing” (“An Interview” 21). Rash’s statement is a direct echo of Percy’s declaration from his essay “Notes for a Novel about the End of the World”: “As it happens, I speak in a Christian context. That is to say, I do not conceive it my vocation to preach the Christian faith in a novel, but as it happens, my world view is informed by a certain belief about man’s nature and destiny” (*Message* 111). In the course of time, Rash’s pronouncements on religion became more subdued—for example, to an Australian literary magazine he said, “I guess you would say that I’m someone who refuses not to believe”—but, like Percy and O’Connor, he frequently describes our world as “mysterious” (“*Kill Your Darlings*” 137).

In his “self-help book” *Lost in the Cosmos*, Percy, in a chapter on envy, asks for readers’ reactions to both plausible and undesirable news, suggesting that most people mysteriously prefer the latter. In the news “which by all criteria should be bad” they “take a certain comfort,” while the “news which by all criteria should be good” makes them “secretly depressed” (*Lost* 63-64). This is even more valid for events: the observers always crave to see other people’s misfortune. In Rash’s “Cherokee,” when Danny and Lisa dock at a slot machine, one of their gambling neighbors is a young man of approximately the same age as them, wearing a Metallica T-shirt. He is losing and silently observing the couple’s growing credit. When Perk asks Lisa whether they are about to cash up, he interrupts their conversation, asserting: “You get these damn machines in a mood to give it up you best stay on them” (*Nothing* 58). After Danny rejoins Lisa and both continue talking to Perk, he “mutters something and turns back to his machine” (59), but, minutes later, he “watches Danny’s credit line instead of playing his machine” (60). During the following hour, when the game “reminds Lisa of a kite in a gusting wind, rising but never quite able to hold on to the sky” (60), she notices that the young man “smiles smugly” when the credit line falls to its lowest, but his smile “vanishes as the numbers rise again” (60). She understands very well that the man craves to see the end of their good luck, which would sufficiently compensate for his own failure: “So that’s what you’re waiting around for, Lisa thinks” (60). When the credit line shows the sum they need, the young man, seeing that the couple are about to leave, makes an attempt at returning them to the risky game: “You got to ride this kind of luck out,” to which Danny resolutely answers, “I don’t *got* to do anything” (62; Rash’s italics).

It is useful to compare “Cherokee” with an older story, in which Rash also explores both the positive and negative outcomes of good luck, even though without a final twist—“Blackberries in June,” found in his 2007 collection *Chemistry and Other Stories* and later included in *Something Rich*

and Strange. The story also introduces a young married couple, at first sight very similar to Danny and Lisa. Like the protagonists of “Cherokee,” Matt and Jamie are hard working and responsible. Good luck came to them in the form of an opportunity to buy cheaply a dilapidated lake house, which they are now trying to renovate. To cover all the payments, both do second jobs: Jamie works as a waitress at nights, while Matt earns extra money by woodcutting for his brother-in-law, who is willing to pay him a percentage instead of hourly wages; they spend all their free time working on the house. It is Jamie who, under the pressure from her family, sometimes wishes they were less lucky and is scared of what might happen in the future. As even Jamie’s father asserts, her mother is “‘always looking for the dark cloud in a blue sky’” (*Something* 339), and her sister-in-law Linda enviously repeats that good luck follows them “‘around like a dog that needs petting all the time’” (342). Matt nevertheless rejects this idea, claiming, “‘You make your own luck’” (343); they do not spend money on cars, expensive clothing, or free-time activities, and they do not even have a phone. While Linda and her husband have three children, even though they can hardly make ends meet, Matt and Jamie plan to have a child only after finishing their night classes and getting a degree. Still, everybody considers their ownership of the lake house not to be a deserved reward for their diligence, but an unearned “miracle” (336), and—because most families never become rich enough to purchase a house of their own—even something immoral for two young people hardly out of their teens. This is a typical situation in Rash’s fiction; as Bjerre aptly sums it up, those who manage to escape from poverty “encounter resentment from members of both lower and upper classes and struggle with guilt for leaving their backgrounds behind” (“Rough South” 100).

The initial situation of “Blackberries in June” is similar to that in “Cherokee,” where the young couple know that they cannot afford the new Ranger, but “the smooth-talking salesman” takes out his calculator, “showing them that with the right financing they could” (*Nothing* 52). As in “Cherokee,” bad luck strikes; Jamie’s brother has a woodcutting accident, and even though Matt saves his life, he loses one leg. Although he alone is responsible for his injury, as he was using the saw while drunk, all the family members start pressuring the young couple to sell their house; as Jamie’s mother says, “‘You got to accept that life is full of disappointments’” (*Something* 349). The decision of the couple, hinted at in the final paragraph, is not to succumb, to keep their house, and to start helping Jamie’s brother and his family only after they graduate and become able to find better-paid jobs, which makes them even more tenacious and persistent than Danny and Lisa in “Cherokee.” Unlike Lisa, who is the weaker half of the two-member team, Jamie, after some hesitation, will probably fight for the realization of the plans she and Matt have had since their high school years.

“Blackberries in June” addresses only one of the two paradoxes to be found in “Cherokee”: the unwillingness of people to accept someone else’s

good luck and success. Circumstances are against the young couple, and yet they manage to stay away from misfortune. It is because they recognize it and understand where it comes from. Kierkegaard explains that good fortune lies in immediacy, while misfortune interferes in the form of a contradiction, which can come from outside or inside. If it comes from outside, it can be grasped, but if not, then “the immediate person remains ignorant of its existence . . . he *feels* the misfortune, but he does not *comprehend* . . . his suffering,” and the result is the person’s loss of self-composure and despair stemming from the impossibility of fathoming what happened (*Concluding 1* 433-34; Kierkegaard’s italics).

“Cherokee” shows both misfortune coming from outside and that coming from inside. Lisa falls into a category of people described by Kierkegaard in his essay “The Unhappiest Man”: “He has no passion, not because he is destitute of it, but because simultaneously he has the opposite passion” (*Either/Or 1* 224). When Kierkegaard writes, “who is the happiest, except the unhappiest, and who the unhappiest, except the happiest, and what is life but madness, and faith but folly, and hope but the briefest respite, and love but vinegar in the wound” (*Either/Or 1* 228), it is not a question but a statement.

While Danny and Lisa’s winning streak may be interpreted as an intervention of fate, which in Kierkegaard’s definition is “a unity of necessity and chance” (*Dread* 87), the click in Lisa’s mind at the end of “Cherokee” refers to the psychological consequences of Kierkegaard’s misfortune from inside. When Percy, on the very first page of his book *The Message in the Bottle*, asks, “Why do people often feel bad in good environments and good in bad environments?” (3), he returns to Kierkegaard’s essay “The Rotation Method,” in which “rotation,” defined as “a change of field,” is seen as a remedy against boredom (*Either/Or 1* 287). As Percy highlights, an unexpected and unplanned experience acts as an antidote to alienation,⁵ and it is even better if it is undesirable, as “at the very heart of the objective-empirical disaster” we can discover “the pearl of great price” (*Message* 99). It is true that most of Percy’s examples of rotation include catastrophic events, from car accidents, through war injuries, to natural disasters, but it is equally true that rotation also works in the opposite way. A desirable event makes people alienated, and only an undesirable, seemingly illogical reaction brings them their inner equilibrium. As Percy explains, “by all objective criteria all is well” with such people, but still they know “that all is not well” with them, and they wait for an event that will change their condition (*Message* 108).

5. I leave aside the fact that, unlike Kierkegaard, Percy does not take rotation merely “as an experiential, a travel category,” but claims that as “a mode of deliverance from alienation, experiencing it directly is no different from experiencing through art” (*Message* 93). This is why I do not speculate whether Lisa’s click in the head can occur at the same time in the heads of at least some perceptive readers.

The moment when a person unexpectedly and suddenly realizes that even though everything seems to be all right, something is terribly wrong, is close to classical *anagnorisis*, when a character's "ignorance gives way to knowledge" (Cuddon 38). It usually starts with a sharp visual image that separates itself from the never-ending succession of everyday images, acquiring enormous significance; it often comes with a sound, usually audible only to the person concerned. Percy, who in an interview describes a situation when a person with their senses numbed by boredom "suddenly looks closely around, and notices just about everything" ("American Writer" 68), calls the stage of life after an event serving as a rotation a "search," emphasizing that the notion of a human being as a wayfarer performing a search is a Christian notion (*Diagnosing* 208).

In "Cherokee," Lisa's significant mental snapshot shows Danny in the breakfast section of the hotel lobby, in the midst of "women wearing purple hats and name tags" who "crowd around a waffle maker," children who "scamper around the room," and near a "man who looks . . . hungover," a mirror of her own morning condition (*Nothing* 66). Still, Danny sits there "alone . . . a Styrofoam coffee cup in his hand" (66). While before this morning Lisa was always in Danny's presence, cherishing the illusion that they did everything together, now she realizes that they are not one body and one mind, but two different entities. Danny is a part of the crowd but at the same time he is alone; similarly, she is his life companion, and yet she is lonely. Her acutely sharpened senses may even bring her to the realization that her married life with Danny has no future.

An identical situation, even though, as in Percy's books, launched by an undesirable event, can be found in Elizabeth Spencer's short story "I, Maureen," in which the female protagonist, watching the process of her husband being rescued after a boating accident, suddenly finds herself running not toward him, but in the opposite direction. Maureen, observing white clouds in the sky, remembers a situation from several weeks before, when her senses suddenly became alert to the minutest details, the trigger being a ray of light reflected from a broken bottle; at this moment her life changes: "From that point I date my new beginning. It was a nothing point, an illusion, but an illusion that had happened to me, if there is such a thing..." (318).

Spencer gives her readers sufficient information on the future life of Maureen, who never returns to her husband, but Rash does not provide a definitive answer to the question of whether or not Lisa stays with Danny. Percy, commenting on what some critics took as a shortcoming of his novels, said: "I take the characters only to a certain point and then leave them. Maybe I give the ending a certain tilt. But I take it as far I believe a novelist can take it. A novelist can't come out with pat answers, with everything resolved, the search resolved" ("American Writer" 69). At the end of the story, Lisa is standing at a crossroads; it is obvious that she will not follow the worn path, having been

turned into one of the loners, so common in existentialist fiction, and who, in Percy's words, "don't feel they belong to that society, or the town, or even a family" ("A Talk" 74). Although the direction she will take remains unclear, some clues are to be found in the story.

Danny's miraculous winning has a negative effect on Lisa, who is not the direct recipient of the gift and, although she thinks about their gambling success as the outcome of a mutual effort, she did not even contribute to it: she never touched the machine, never inserted a note into the slot, and when Danny left to get a beer and move around, she was just sitting on the stool, "watching the machine" (*Nothing* 58). While Danny stays sober during their evening in the bar, she gets so drunk that she has a blackout. Her abrupt estrangement from Danny therefore stems partly from the fact that they cease to be on a par, although, as a protective tool, she is still mixing her own perspective with her husband's ("a man who knows as well as she does"). As the click Lisa hears in her head is dangerously similar to the characteristic sound of slot machines in the casino, it is safe to assume that she now sees human life as a gamble, which nevertheless has but one certainty: that one day the game will be over. As Rash is not willing to moralize, it is up to any reader to decide whether they see Lisa's change as fortunate or unfortunate, and the situation that activated her search as lucky or unlucky.

In "Cherokee," Rash proves that a story can plumb the greatest depths of human existence without showing a violent action, or involving the death of a character. In most of his stories, he deals with misfortunes that befall people as a consequence of the history and geography of their (and his) native region. This time he explores multiple corners of the human psyche. The story can be seen as a tribute to two of Rash's major influences, O'Connor and Percy, but there is much more than that. In a style that is unmistakably his own, he takes a journey from initial skepticism, through surface optimism, to unsettling disharmony at the end. The story offers a probe into the mystery of human happiness and luck in a mostly secular environment where God offers grace to those who rely on superstitions and charms.

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Cet article analyse la nouvelle de Ron Rash intitulée "Cherokee", dans laquelle la chance, bonne ou mauvaise, joue un rôle primordial. L'auteur y défend l'idée que Ron Rash a recours à des stratégies familières aux essais et aux nouvelles de Flannery O'Connor et les associe magistralement aux réflexions existentialistes de Walker Percy et de son prédécesseur au dix-neuvième siècle, Søren Kierkegaard. Cet article illustre la manière dont les superstitions s'infiltrèrent dans le monde moderne des casinos, avec ses machines à sous informatisées, et démontre qu'une expérience de jeu peut se transformer en expérience mystique. Une chance miraculeuse peut s'interpréter comme la manifestation d'une grâce divine pour des pécheurs qui ne la méritent en rien, en accord avec le principe narratif cher à O'Connor d'un développement à la fois complètement inattendu et vraisemblable. La dernière partie de cet article se penche plus particulièrement sur la fin ambiguë de "Cherokee" et démontre, avec l'aide de Percy et de Kierkegaard, que la chance implique automatiquement la malchance, en explorant simultanément deux paradoxes du comportement humain : les individus ne supportent pas la chance de leurs prochains et se sentent à leur tour aliénés lorsque tout va bien dans leur vie, souhaitant un changement malheureux.