

A CLOSE READING · ON DOUBLING

# Conversion Without Erasure

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*A close reading of “Assumptions” — how the story lets a  
household word carry a sacred sense without ever  
withdrawing the ordinary one.*

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## ABSTRACT

“Assumptions” is most often read for its Marian frame — the Feast day, the antiphon, the closing turn on the language of papal definition — or for the sacred vocabulary it refuses. This essay reads the mechanism instead. It argues that the story’s characteristic operation is conversion without erasure — a word or gesture holding an ordinary and a sacred sense within the same clause, with the mundane explanation never retired to make room for the other. Working through *awful*, *blinds*, the oath “For Christ’s sake,” the sun/Son homophone, and the images of oil, stain, crown, and crossed arms, it distinguishes canonization from catharsis and locates the story’s theology in its furniture rather than its statements.

## I. A Word That Will Not Choose

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That the title of “Assumptions” works in two directions at once — a thing taken for granted, a thing taken up — has been established elsewhere; *The Words It Never Says* follows that double sense through the story’s diction and shows how the sacred vocabulary is kept out altogether. This essay takes the mechanism itself as its subject: not which words are missing, but what happens inside the words that stay.

What happens is easily mistaken for symbolism. Symbolism ordinarily asks the literal object to stand aside once its figurative errand is understood; the object becomes a token and stops being itself. Here the literal is never spent. Window blinds remain window blinds while also becoming blindness. The word “awful” remains a complaint about ugliness while also recovering its older sense, full of awe. Neither sense is asked to yield, and the reader is given no instruction about which to prefer.

Call the operation conversion without erasure. It is the story’s characteristic gesture at the level of the individual word, and once it is visible in the vocabulary it can be traced outward — into the images, into the staging, and finally into what the story declines to say about any of it.

## II. The Vocabulary of Doubling

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### Awful

The story’s use of “awful” is exact rather than casual. On the surface it is domestic dismissal — a thing looks awful, a person feels awful. Beneath it sits the older register in which the awful is what cannot be looked at directly. The word therefore

diminishes and enlarges in the same breath, and the reader is left holding both senses at once.<sup>1</sup>

### **Blinds**

Blinds are among the plainest objects in a house. They are also the mechanism by which light is admitted or refused, and the noun cannot help carrying the condition of not seeing. The scene never pauses to gloss this. The blinds go up or come down as a person would actually raise or lower them, and the second meaning accumulates in the reader’s peripheral vision — which is, appropriately, how blindness works.<sup>1</sup>

### **For Christ’s sake**

The clearest specimen is a line of impatience at the water’s edge, where a sister loses patience with Peg:

“For Christ’s sake, Peg! The point is to get wet. How else are you going to get the cure?”<sup>2</sup>

The oath is exasperation and, in an Irish Catholic household, a literal invocation; nothing in the delivery marks the difference. The cure urged is a dip in the cold Atlantic, and the devotional history of the word — holy well, shrine, miraculous bath — is carried intact inside an irritable command. The theological freight is kept; the theological tone is refused.

### **Sun and Son**

The pun is never announced and never insisted upon. Sunlight falls where sunlight falls, on skin and floorboards and a crowded beach, and the homophone hums underneath it. The restraint matters. A stated pun would convert the story into a puzzle; an unstated one leaves it a story in which the light happens to have a second name.<sup>1</sup>

## **III. Conversion Without Erasure**

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The same procedure governs the story’s images. Tanning oil, applied for vanity, is also anointing — unction performed by people who would deny they were performing any such thing. A stain, in the ordinary sense of a mark that will not come out, is also stigmata, the wound that testifies. Baldness — illness, exposure, humiliation — becomes a crown. The punitive heat of a Catholic childhood’s instruction becomes ordinary sunlight. Crossed arms, the posture of withholding, become an embrace.

In each pair the ordinary term keeps its full force. The oil is greasy; the stain is a nuisance; the bald head is genuinely diminished; the crossed arms are genuinely defensive. The story does not redeem these things by replacing them. It canonizes them by leaving them exactly as they are and letting the second meaning stand alongside the first.

This is why the story reads as canonization rather than catharsis. Catharsis requires a purge, after which the pressure is gone. “Assumptions” withholds that release. Nothing is discharged. What changes is the status of what remains: the same objects, the same slights, the same bodies, now understood to have been holy while they were being endured.

#### IV. The Vertical Axis

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Marian dogma supplies the story’s spatial grammar.<sup>3</sup> Beneath the realist surface runs an axis of ascent and descent, and the narration keeps returning to it: raised and lowered blinds, a body lifted or laid down, a gaze directed up or away, the difference between the ground and the light falling onto it. The Assumption is a doctrine about a body going up. The story is largely about bodies being taken down — by illness, by shame, by the ordinary indignities of family management — and about the counter-motion available to them.

The counter-motion arrives in the closing image, seen from above as the narrator rises:

“my grandmother and Peggy waved to us, transfigured figurines on the earth below, their clothing white as snow.”<sup>2</sup>

The scriptural whites of Revelation and Matthew arrive at a Massachusetts amusement park, and they work only because the same five letters have already been spent on a white lie, on weather, and on a sundress. Nothing asks the reader to forget the lie. No character articulates the pattern; it is carried entirely by staging and by verbs, which is this story’s consistent preference — theology enacted in furniture rather than argued in dialogue.

## V. What the Narration Refuses to Do

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The narrating consciousness is young enough not to know what it is describing, and the prose declines to supply the missing knowledge. Adult motives are reported as observable behavior. Cruelty appears as tone of voice. Fear appears as a task performed too carefully. The absence of interpretation is not coyness; it reproduces the position of a child in a house where the important information is being managed by other people.

Dialogue follows the same discipline. Explanatory tags are largely absent, attribution is carried by gesture and position, and the em dash marks the places where a sentence is abandoned before it becomes fully intelligible. What the adults stop short of saying constitutes much of the plot, and the reader assembles it. The wider account of that method is given in *The Remembering Voice*.

## VI. Recurrence as Argument

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The doublings are not local ornament. They are the sentence-level form of a claim the wider body of work keeps making: that characters, scenes, symbols, and settings return by design, and that nothing loved is finished happening.<sup>4</sup> A stain that is also a stigma is, among other things, a statement about time — that an episode can recur in a higher register without losing the first, humiliating particularity of its occurrence. The second sense does not arrive to cancel the first; it arrives the way a later incarnation arrives, carrying what came before.

Six permeable boundaries organize that architecture — living and dead, past and present, thought and feeling, self and other, sleeping and waking, sacred and ordinary.<sup>4</sup> “Assumptions” presses hardest on the last of them, and its discipline is that the membrane is never torn. The sacred is not imported into the kitchen or the beach from somewhere above them. It is discovered to have been there the whole time, in the blinds, in the oil, in the swearing, available to anyone who was paying the kind of attention the story trains.

This is also why the reading offered here stops short of allegory. An allegory would require the ordinary sense to be a vehicle and the sacred sense its cargo. Recurrence proposes something else: two orders of meaning occupying the same object because, in this fiction, they were never separable in the first place.

## VII. The Title, Returned To

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The mechanism finally turns on the title itself. By the end, the story has quietly indicted its own ordinary meaning. The assumptions of the household — about who is difficult, who is failing, what a body signifies, what God requires — are shown to have been the ordinary machinery of unkindness. Against them stands the other Assumption: the possibility that a body treated as a burden was, throughout, being taken up.

The story does not choose between these readings, and the refusal is not evasion. It is the argument. The ordinary explanation is never withdrawn, because withdrawing it would place the sacred somewhere other than the kitchen, the beach, and the sick room — which is precisely where this fiction insists on finding it.

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## Notes

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1. The double senses of *awful*, *blinds*, *assumption*, and the sun/Son homophone are author-confirmed readings of the story rather than editorial speculation.
2. James Mulhern, “Assumptions.” Both quoted passages are carried over from the verbatim-checked collation in “[The Words It Never Says](#)”.
3. On the Marian frame, the antiphon, and the story’s religious architecture, see “[Altogether Beautiful](#)” and [the religious-architecture study](#).
4. On recurrence as design rather than repetition, and on the six permeable boundaries, see “[A Note on My Philosophy of Writing](#)”, [Repeated Incarnations](#), and [The Recurring Image](#).

## Works Quoted

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Quotations are drawn from James Mulhern, “Assumptions,” and are reproduced from the verbatim-checked collation in [The Words It Never Says](#); the interpretive claims about doubling are author-confirmed.

Related essays on this site: [The Words It Never Says](#) reads the vocabulary the story withholds; [Altogether Beautiful](#) and [the religious-architecture study](#) set out the Marian frame; [Editions and Variants](#) traces the published states of the text; [The Remembering Voice](#) places the technique within the wider style.

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