

*Kwansei Gakuin University*  
*Humanities Review*  
Vol. 17, 2012  
Nishinomiya, Japan

## The Convergence of Grace and Violence in Southern Grotesqueries

John W. WILSON\*

During the early and mid-twentieth century, the American South produced many prolific writers of the short story. This article concentrates on two writers of Southern grotesquerie; the first, whose mature writing career began in 1920, Sherwood Anderson; the other, whose career blossomed in the late 1940s, Flannery O'Connor. While the major works of these two artists are more than twenty-five years apart, both produced novels and numerous anthologized short stories of which unveil Southern grotesquerie in fresh ways, particularly on O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find" and Anderson's "Death in the Woods" and how these stories converge on the theme of Southern grotesquerie realized through physical violence. Paradoxically, many of these acts of violence within the texts demonstrate evidence of grace.

In the works of these two writers, Southern grotesquerie is often demonstrated through physical violence and death. Miss O'Connor explains distortions by stating that [the writer]

. . . with a Christian conscience will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he may be forced to take more violent means to get his vision across (Quinn, 141).

In other words, in Miss O'Connor's fiction, the hard of hearing must often be shouted at; the vision impaired must be painted very large pictures. O'Connor's grotesquerie tends to correspond to the Oxford dictionary meaning of the word. It is shockingly incongruous or inappropriate. Her distortions are meant to break through to those who see distortions as normal. In "A Good Man is Hard to Find," there is a strange elegance to very violent actions. The story begins innocently as O'Connor introduces the character of the Misfit, an escaped murderer who, with the help of

---

\* Associate Lecturer of English, School of Policy Students, Kwansai Gakuin University

his cronies, kills an entire family at the end of the story. Through this character, O'Connor explores the Christian concept of "grace"—that a divine pardon from God is available simply for the asking. In the story, the Grandmother—a petty, argumentative, and imperious individual—attains grace at the moment of her death, when she reaches out to the Misfit and recognizes him as one of her own children.

On the other hand, what can be elegant about six people murdered in the woods somewhere in the South between Georgia and Florida? The distortions begin with the Misfit who could be perceived by some readers as a perfect gentleman. First, he appears honest in his request to have the children sit near their mother: "Children make me nervous" he declares sincerely, though he also appears sinister (588). The reader witnesses a decent upbringing in that the Misfit has been taught good manners. He apologizes for being without a shirt, respects the Grandmother and her daughter-in-law by addressing them as "lady" and "ma'am," and even rebukes Bailey, the Grandmother's son, for his harsh words directed towards his mother "that shocked even the children" (588). The external qualities of the Misfit point to him being a gentleman, and for a moment, the Misfit even believes he is a "good man" (588). Whereas this murderous kind of gentility might be seen by some of her readers as legitimate, the Misfit is elegant, and even graceful. But a good man? Hardly. Here O'Connor uses the qualities of a "good man" and combines them with the monstrous character of a cold-blooded murderer. A graceful distortion.

In addition to the distortion of the Misfit, there is a strangely elegant way in which these characters go to their deaths. Their actions just before death reveal surprising qualities. In the story, as the mother and her children are marched into the woods to be assassinated, the mother replies "Yes, thank you" as though a burden is about to be lifted. This somewhat peaceful event for Bailey's wife is one in which most women would be hysterical, or at least display some emotional uneasiness or distress. Bailey, a father figure in the story, has to practically be hoisted from a squatting position, as if he were "an old man," revealing a coward in one who ought to have been "a good man." Again, another graceful distortion.

The grandmother is a different case however. Just after the Grandmother recognizes the Misfit, she rises from a seated position to standing, and emphatically declares, "You're the Misfit!" Moments later she questions her own faith by stating "Maybe He [Jesus] didn't raise the dead," and then drops into the ditch with her legs curled under her. In the next few lines following, there appears a "double epiphany" when both the Grandmother and the Misfit have their moment of realization; his voice seems about to crack, indicating perhaps he may have some hope of a life other than just meanness, and the Grandmother's head for a moment clears allowing her to accept her own violent death, a fate which is certain to come.

It is at this precise moment that “. . . grace is occasioned by its own absence, by the despair, leading to rage or to humility, that all of O’Connor’s characters, saved or not, fall into” (Schleifer, 485).

Then the Grandmother is shot three times at point blank range. It is no wonder that Miss O’Connor declared, “Violence is a force which can be used for good or evil” and that “. . . the kingdom of heaven comes for many only after they are badly shaken (Greisch, 20). The act of grace seems not to be in the act of killing, but rather the moments of realization. The grandmother finally realizes her responsibility for the Misfit because Jesus loves her (and her clichés about Jesus are true) despite the murderous atmosphere and absence of love.

The notion of grace is not limited to an exclusively Christian ideology. Existentialism, the philosophy of existence, appeared near the mid-twentieth century and attempted to create a new world outlook corresponding to a pessimistic pattern of thought of intellectuals of the period. The ideological roots of existentialism are grounded in the philosophy of life (phenomenology) and mystic-religious teachings of Kierkegaard and are subdivided into the religious (Marcel, Jaspers, Berdyayev) and the non-religious or atheistic (Heidegger, Sartre, Camus). This notion becomes significant for our understanding of O’Connor when existentialism attempts to answer the question of how a human being should live after their liberal illusions have been shattered by historical disasters.

Miss O’Connor’s Misfit appears to be looking for answers explaining the reasons for his shattered historical past as well as his shattered belief in Jesus. The Misfit’s historical past is a burden to him. First he admits “There is no pleasure [in this world] . . . but meanness” (592). Though this is an abrupt conclusion, it is truth to him at the moment. He feels he must act according to his own code, and that he alone is the sole determiner of his fate. Though his past makes him uneasy, he seems uncomfortable only when talking to the grandmother. Here, “. . . he looked up and held her attention to him by a steady stare” and it is not so much what is said by the characters that is significant but rather what is done.

According to author Gabriel Marcel, existentialism constantly emphasizes that man is held responsible for everything that happens in history. However, the explanation of freedom by existentialism is incomplete because it discusses freedom in a purely ethical and not in a social plane. For most, a definition of existentialism proves difficult to construct because according to author Thomas Merton, “[It]···is an experience and an attitude, rather than a system of thought. As soon as it begins to present itself as a system, it denies and destroys itself” (Merton, 145).

Later in the story, the Misfit experiences his moment of realization when his outlook on life changes to “It’s no real pleasure in life” (593). He is not startled at the sounds of gunfire heard in a distance and continues his conversation with the

Grandmother even though her family is being executed, one by one. Though there is neither self-judgment nor any evidence of conversion to Christianity, there is a change. His attitude towards life changes, if just for a moment, because he wants it to.

The Grandmother's moment of grace is revealed in a slightly different light. As is consistent with most of Miss O'Connor's short stories, the protagonist is proud, a woman who considers herself beyond reproach and ". . . is boastful about her own abilities, her Christian goodness, and her property and possessions" (Shackleford, 1759). The Grandmother has hidden fears which surface through an outsider figure, the Misfit, who serves as a cohesive element to inaugurate a metamorphosis in the protagonist's perception.

Killing the Grandmother with three shots to the chest (instead of one) was perhaps more of a shock to the Misfit than it was to the Grandmother. This scene reveals the Grandmother's moment of Christian grace in her recognition of human bond with the man about to kill her along with the existential grace of the Misfit as he accepts his responsibility as murderer while opening an optimistic door to future possibilities of hope. Grace explores beyond the surface and attempts to look within. When he removes his glasses the reader sees pale, defenseless-looking, red-rimmed eyes; a view of the real individual behind the murderer. Even his pessimistic view, thanks to the Grandmother, is modified. In both characters, violence shows where they are lacking and grace fills the gap.

The works of Sherwood Anderson, on the other hand, demonstrate grotesquerie with distorted truths. In the case of "Death in the Woods," one truth is stressed at the expense of truth itself. The story is told by a narrator, now older, who has had an incident on his mind for quite some time and can unfold its effects upon him and understand its meanings only by talking about it. He summarizes all the facts he recalls and sums up the obvious meaning of the story; but the real meaning of the story lies in the total effect the episode has upon the teller himself. The story concerns a farm woman—old at the age of forty—who has spent her life feeding animals: pigs, dogs, chickens and cows, as well as the "animal hunger" of her brutal and negligent husband and son. Returning home from the village one winter night with a bag of food strapped on her shoulder, she sits down to rest beneath a tree, falls into an exhausted sleep, and freezes to death. When she is found a day or two later, her body is face down in the snow, her clothes have been ripped away and the sack of food has been opened and emptied by her four dogs, which manage to drag her body into a clearing. As the dogs are pulling on the sack, a circular path is made in the snow around her.

The picture depicts a unique vision full of grace: a pre-maturely aged woman, beautiful and young-looking in death, lying in snow surrounded by the oval path

made by the dogs. Enclosed by an oval path, the dead woman's body whose life had been old and worn out, is white and lovely like a framed medallion of Mary, Mother of Christ. Anderson, in this scene, demonstrates a type of silent tableau, which reveals many of the contrasts and paradoxes—the haunting, mysterious dramas of death and life—and gathers them in a framed symbolic portrait. Her beauty is evident only in her death. People only give her any thought after she is dead. Upon the discovery of her remains, the boys and men stare silently and in awe: as a feeder of animals and men the woman has been so thoroughly submissive, alone, and without identity and love, that there is a kind of grotesque harmony and loveliness in her absolute human renunciation. Somewhere within her utter degradation exists a primitive meaningfulness:

“The whole thing, the story of the old woman's death,” the narrator concludes, “was to me as I grew older like music heard from far off.” For him, the scene became a part of his imaginative life; and, mystified, he unconsciously experienced the complex, paradoxical nature of beauty and took on a new consciousness of what life is worth. The strange atavistic ritual of the dogs, a reversion to a wild primitive state, emphasizes the residue of beauty and the essential mystery that lies at even the most basic levels of life (Burbank, 127).

Even her name is significant. In death, Mrs. Grimes has been smudged by her role as wife and mother. To the boy who looks on, her years of being bullied and beaten seem unscathed as if death had erased the marks of her tragic life. The boy always remembers the sight, but only in his adult years does he come to the realization that she was one whom life had reduced to its inferior levels. As in Anderson's earlier stories dealing with adolescent initiation, “Death in the Woods”

. . . transcends that initial theme and becomes a story of adult realization; of recognition that death is inevitable. . . [and] that it can be a release from and a compensation for the brutality and the lack of feeling one encounters in life. [and]. . . to commemorate the silent, welcome deaths that occur whenever man reduces his relations with his fellows to the level of the jungle (Anderson, 131).

Regardless how violent the acts are; the beatings, the amoral son, the dogs tearing away at the grain bag, the story is told only as the narrator remembers it. Many of the distortions are full of grace, no matter how violent they may seem. Even though the narrator is telling the story through an adult's eyes, it is how he remembers the sight as a child. As an adult he realizes. As a child he remembers what he visualized. The story is told as a story and the adult realization, which

came from it, not as an act of violence. The story even caused the narrator to remember a critical time in his own life, similar to that of the old woman in the story, where he too sat to have a rest in the snow with a pack of dogs circling before him (462). The natural environment of the woods is graceful, mysterious and shockingly violent: Mrs. Grimes freezes to death in the woods but this act of violence is what beautifies her, as though she welcomes her eternal rest.

In these two stories, what could be suggested about the mystic qualities of the woods? The landscape directly contributes to the adult realization of the main characters. Since antiquity, precise descriptive details have been associated with landscape settings for battlefields, love scenes, and mysterious plot developments. Landscapes still have their regional symbolic function and according to Daemmrich, "Landscapes may (1) frame the action, (2) Provide the setting, (3) Reflect emotions of characters, (4) Create moods, (5) Serve as an ornament, (6) Characterize events, (7) Contrast as a special element with other textual units and (8) Motivate behavior. When he continues, he reminds the reader ". . . the author's intent determines what specific details are included or omitted" (Daemmrich, 97).

The woods in "Death in the Woods" and "A Good Man is Hard to Find" reveal the action's setting, but also bring the main characters to their moment of adult realization, a moment which often produces fear and uncertainty. O'Connor couples the ". . . tall, dark and deep" woods with the cryptic approach of the Misfit and his followers to reveal ". . . a dark open mouth" ready to swallow any who come near (588). Her similes send suspenseful messages to the reader: keep reading, something is about to happen.

This fear and uncertainty is also present in "Death in the Woods." A realization overcomes Mrs. Grimes when, according to the narrator, she sees nightfall coming upon her, and after climbing over fences, admits that she might not make it home (460). The narrator suggests that Mrs. Grimes may have even witnessed the canine celebration just before her death (461). These moments of suspense grip readers and maintain their interest until the conclusion of the story. Just like a television movie at a climactic moment when a knife is raised to pierce into the flesh of a victim, if the person in charge of the remote control accidentally changes channel, the moment of suspense is lost because that precise moment is the one the viewer couldn't afford to miss.

It is worth noting that these two stories about adult realization are constructed within a male dominated world. The voice of women is responded to violently and silenced. To the narrator, many [older] women are voiceless like Mrs. Grimes. Mrs. Grimes is alienated early in her life. As a young child she is adopted and at a young age sexually assaulted by her adoptive father. And while the narrator remembers clear visual details of her, he never remembers hearing the sound of her voice, and

in the graceful ending, climactic irony prevails when, even after Mrs. Grimes is dead, she's still feeding animals.

To the contrary, in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," the Grandmother's voice is what gets her and her family killed. The Misfit declares, "Yes'm . . . but if would have been better for all of you, lady, if you hadn't of reckernized me" (588). However, had the Grandmother not spoken, neither she nor the Misfit would have experienced their saving moment of adult realization.

Graceful distortions in a text often reveal humanistic characterizations, yet when some readers embark upon a literary journey, discovery can be troubling when stories include violence and death. Some of Flannery O'Connor and Sherwood Anderson's readers experience a sense of uneasiness when reading their stories about death and violence focused towards women, however when the reader looks past the surface and deep within the soul of the literature, they undoubtedly find meaning. In these stories adult realization finds grace through acts of violence, and this revelation not only occurs when the reader looks at the texts; it occurs when the reader looks within at their self.

## Reference

- Anderson, David D. *Sherwood Anderson*. Boston: Twayne Publisher Inc., 1964.
- Anderson, Sherwood. "Death in the Woods." *Short Fiction: An Introductory Anthology*. Eds. David Rampton and Gerald Lynch. Montreal: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Canada Inc., 1992.
- Asals, Frederick. *Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity*. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1982.
- Balee, Susan. "Flannery O'Connor Resurrected" *The Hudson Review* April 1994: 377–393.
- Brinkmeyer, R. H. *The Art and Vision of Flannery O'Connor*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989.
- Browning, Preston M. "Flannery O'Connor and the Demonic." *Modern Fiction Studies* 19 (1973): 29–41.
- Budd, Louis J. "The Grotesques of Anderson and Wolfe." *Modern Fiction Studies* 5 (1959): 304–310.
- Burbank, Rex. *Sherwood Anderson*. Boston: Twayne Publisher Inc., 1964.
- Colquitt, Clare. "The Reader as Voyeur: Complicitous Transformations in 'Death in the Woods.'" *Modern Fiction Studies* 32.2 (1986): 175–190.
- Crews, Harry. "The Power of Flannery O'Connor." *The New York Review of Books* 26 April 1990, 49–55.
- Daemmrich, Horst S. and Ingrid. *Themes and Motifs in Western Literature: A Handbook*. Tübingen, Germany: A. Francke Verlag Press, 1993.
- Faulkner, William. "Sherwood Anderson: An Appreciation." *Sherwood Anderson*. Ed. Walter B. Rideout. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974. 166–170.

- Fitzgerald, Robert. "Introduction to 'Everything That Rises Must Converge.'" *Women Writers of the Short Story: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Heather McClave. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1980. 124–135.
- Friedman, Norman. "What Makes a Short Story Short?" *Modern Fiction Studies* 4.2 (1958): 103–117.
- Gardiner, Judith Kegan. "On Female Identity and Writing by Women." *Writing and Sexual Difference*. Ed. Elizabeth Abel. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982. 177–191.
- Gentry, Marshall B. "The Eye vs. The Body: Individual and Communal Grotesquerie in Wise Blood." *Modern Fiction Studies* 28.3 (1982): 487–493.
- Grajewski, Julian. "Sherwood Anderson." *Critical Survey of Short Fiction*. Ed. Frank N. Magill. Vol.1. Pasadena: Salem Press, 1993. 7 vols. 68–75.
- Greisch, Janet R. "The Refiner's Fire." *Christianity Today* July 1974: 19–20.
- Havird, David. "The Saving Rape: Flannery O'Connor and Patriarchal Religion." *Mississippi Quarterly: The Journal of Southern Culture* 47.1 (1993): 17–26.
- Heath, Stephen. "Male Feminism." *Feminist Literary Criticism*. Ed. Mary Eagleton. New York: Longman, Inc., 1991. 193–225.
- Howe, Irving. "The Short Stories." *Sherwood Anderson*. Ed. Walter B. Rideout. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974. 101–119.
- Lawry, Jon S. "'Death in the Woods' and the Artist's Self in Sherwood Anderson." *PMLA* 74 (1959): 306–311.
- Marcel, Gabriel. *The Philosophy of Existence*. New York: Books for Libraries Press., 1969.
- Merton, Thomas. "The Other Side of Despair." *Women Writers of the Short Story: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Heather McClave. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1980. 145–149.
- Murphy, George D. "The Theme of Sublimation in Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio." *Modern Fiction Studies* 13.2 (1967): 237–246.
- Oates, Joyce Carol. "The Visionary Art of Flannery O'Connor." *Women Writers of the Short Story: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Heather McClave. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1980. 145–149.
- O'Connor, Flannery M. *The Complete Works of Flannery O'Connor*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971.
- . "A Good Man is Hard to Find." *Major American Short Stories*. Rev. Ed. Ed. A. Walton Litz. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980.
- Quinn, Bernetta M. "Flannery O'Connor: A Realist of Distances." *Women Writers of the Short Story: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Heather McClave. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1980. 136–144.
- Schleifer, Ronald. "Rural Gothic: The Stories of Flannery O'Connor." *Modern Fiction Studies* 28.3 (1982): 474–485.
- Shackelford, Dean D. "Flannery O'Connor." *Critical Survey of Short Fiction*. Ed. Frank N. Magill. Vol. 5. Pasadena: Salem Press, 1993. 7 vols. 1756–63.
- Walcutt, Charles C. "Naturalism in Winesburg, Ohio." *Sherwood Anderson: Winesburg, Ohio*. Ed. John H. Ferres. New York: Viking Press, 1966. 432–443.
- Warnock, Mary. *Existentialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970.
- Whipple, T. K. "Sherwood Anderson." *Sherwood Anderson*. Ed. Walter B. Rideout. New Jersey:



Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974. 87–100.

White, Terry. “Allegorical Evil, Existentialist Choice in O’Connor, Oats, and Styron.” *The Midwest Quarterly: A Journal of Contemporary Thought*. 34.4. June (1993): 383–397.

Winther, S. K. “The Aura of Loneliness in Sherwood Anderson.” *Modern Fiction Studies* 5.4 (1959): 145–152.