

**FLANNERY O'CONNOR AND HER STANDPOINT ON
THE PROBLEM OF EVILNESS**



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It is never too late to start reading tales again
C.S. Lewis

Motivation, origins and aims

A story is a way to say something that can't be said any other way, and it takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is. The mindful disposition of words in such work, such an art Literature is has been long discussed, and not but a handful of writers have reached the balance Flannery O'Connor achieved in blending moral, aesthetic and theological assertions she deeply held, experienced, as truth, with the thoughtful awareness of the object she devoted a life cut not tragically short, but offered with the security of having fought the good fight and run the good race, for she had done the best in this marathon that had so much of the disappointment and neverending and circular sense of self-defeat a rat race has because of her self-consciousness of the disbelief their contemporaries were immersed in, a fact present in many of her writings, especially in her correspondence, compiled in *The habit of being*¹, a recurrent communication channel through which she could freely express her frustrations with the contemporary audience for which she wrote. But far from sinking into despair due to this generation's inability to assume and share her religious vision of reality, the whole theological frame of reference that once provided the coherence for Western culture and collective imagination, but which does no longer, O'Connor reinforces her labor and the pursuit of this particular quest of her, which is nothing but coherent consequence of the assumption of mystery and a consistent belief put into practice despite setbacks –physical and sociological ones-:

*One of the awful things about writing when you are a Christian is that for you the ultimate reality is the Incarnation, the present reality is the Incarnation, the whole reality is the Incarnation, and nobody believes in the Incarnation; that is, nobody in your audience. My audience are the people who think God is dead. At least these are the people I am conscious of writing for*².

Paraphrasing what is expressed in "Some aspects of the Grotesque in Southern fiction"³, a novelist must be characterized by his vision, which has to be transmitted in a way that will very definitely be affected by the limitations and blind spots of his audience. Deprived of a common-ground and shared assumptions that allow direct address, necessity led her to search for new modes of indirection, strategies of communication that might open the reader to dimensions of life become inaccessible to many and remote to most, that *nobody* she

¹ O'CONNOR, Flannery. *The habit of being*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. New York, 1988.

² Flannery O'Connor, letter to A., August 2, 1955. *The habit of being*.

³ Essay penned in 1960 eventually included in the posthumous collection of her unpublished lectures, essays and critical articles *Mystery and manners: Occasional prose*. While the essay focuses on Southern literature, it touches on a number of bigger questions in all literature, most crucially how the qualifiers and variables attached to a writer — in this case, religion and regional geography — affect the writerliness of the writer.

mentioned, rhetorically guiding the reader to infer a Christian meaning from a text that is settled in a recognizably real world, a *nature* which we can acknowledge to be our own.

Her pen laid open her judgement with a complete absence of partisan blindness, a clear eye and charity for human foibles; *and a wariness of her own limitations -an ability to measure her effort and herself against truth*⁴. To that I should add her aim as an artist to render the highest possible justice to the visible universe, an expression by Joseph Conrad from which she diverted by attaching a fine nuance: for her the visible universe was a reflection of the invisible universe⁵, as her fictional prose was a reflection of the intimate entries of her prayer journal⁶, a recently discovered rare portal into her interior life, in which it can, for example, be read how she thanked God for *having been given a story*.

This logical identification of thoughts and deeds, her intense and sharp attitude towards not understanders and the perpetual misunderstandings and misinterpretations –at least contradictions and incongruities one can easily find even in thoughtful editions and comments– have intensified a long-lasting thirst for a deeper knowledge of the author that charmed me with captivating and shocking stories in which Flannery's wit and sharp sense of humor is ever present despite the sometimes grim subject matter. Facing the fear of a tendency to hyperbole when expounding life and works of writers I esteem and hold high, I belatedly resolved to do this paper on Flannery O'Connor after having weighed different alternatives mainly because of the intuition I have of this American cult literary celebrity as a great unknown among students, not few times isolated and marginalized in syllabus that do not deem her literary importance in the forging of what has come to be called the “southern grotesque”, running in parallel in some distinguishing marks with authors such as William Faulkner or Carson McCullers, but raising herself also to a different category at a time.

Fascination does not come only when reading her, but also when reading of her. Her exceptional personality and unique essence allure critics, bloggers, readers, who have found in her habits a source of curious oddities that arouse so many queries around the role of biography in work and is so thought-provoking for those accustomed to walk along the field of Literary Theory. As a matter of fact, fiction is currently spreading around her life, as three recently published books exemplify: a novel about the conflictive relationship she had with the poet Robert Lowell⁷ –yes, valid for a catching up novel–, another one about the relationship with her mother and her way of life in *Andalusia*⁸, and not only has she been a muse for prose, but also an inspiration for poetry: last year it was published *The red wolf: A dream of Flannery O'Connor*, written by R.T. Smith⁹.

An overview into her life, background and atmosphere

You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you odd. This quote of hers can be seen in banners and posters carried by her devotees in the second annual Flannery O'Connor Day Parade in Savannah –the commemorative day, 16th January was officially established by Jimmy Carter when he was governor of Georgia–. So was she, that woman who described herself as *a pidgeon-toed, only child and you-leave-me-alone-or-I'll-bite-you complex*, the woman who I

⁴ STEPHENS, Ralph (ed.), *Correspondence of Flannery O'Connor and the Brainard Cheneys*, page XXV. 188 previously unpublished letters between Flannery O'Connor and novelist Brainard Cheney, a fellow Roman Catholic close to the Tate circle.

⁵ The habit of being, page 128.

⁶ A prayer journal. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. New York, 2013.

⁷ BAUER, Carlene. *Frances and Bernard*. Houghton Mifflin.

A review by Claudia La Rocco: 'Poetry, love and letters: A romance imagined', *The New York Times*. 4th March, 2013. Page C4.

⁸ NAPOLITANO, Ann. *A good hard look: A novel on Flannery O'Connor*. Penguin Books. June, 2012.

⁹ SMITH, R.T. *The red wolf: A dream of Flannery O'Connor*. Louisiana Literary Press. January, 2013.

A review by Sarah Tschiggfrie: 'Poetry book by W&L's R.T. Smith evokes Flannery O'Connor'. It is available on Washington and Lee University's web (4th February, 2013).

would like to depict firstly by giving a once-over to analyze the source of much of her art, suggesting how her background provided an apparent source for some of her more obvious features –her Southernness, her Catholicism, her persistent irony, her skillful employment of comic machinery, her preoccupation with death.

In its external features, the life of Flannery O'Connor is easily told. Born in Savannah, Georgia, to a Catholic family, she grew up in Milledgeville, the place that provided her with the materials from which she shaped her vision. Her Southernness is undeniable, but, as with the other major writers who have emerged from the area, the region is for her an instrument, not an end. She herself was acutely aware of the dangers of lapsing into a restrictive *regionalism*. She attended the local woman's college and later the Iowa Writer's Workshop, and she lived briefly with Sally and Robert Fitzgerald in Connecticut. When she was twenty-five, she suffered her first major attack of disseminated lupus, the disease which would bring her death fourteen years later. From 1951 onwards, she lived with her mother at Andalusia, a farm near Milledgeville; she continued to write but at a steadily decreasing rate. Fortunately, her talents matured early; and, though her total output was relatively small, her achievement is impressive. Indeed, Evelyn Waugh found it difficult to believe that a girl in her twenties could have produced the stunning effects of the early stories, observing: *If this is the unaided work of a young lady, it is a remarkable product*¹⁰.

Such, briefly, are the surface features of a life she thought crucially influenced upon by being a Catholic, a Southerner and a writer, and that molded a particular self we get to know in her correspondence more directly than by reading her stories, both readings disrupted once by bursts of laughter, once by a piercing feeling of unknowing what is behind this blending of the *comic* and the *serious* in a single view of reality. This dual perspective of hers is evident in her work since the very early stages, and it is observable in her attitude towards three subjects which were of special concern of her: peacocks, cartoon drawings and her own prolonged illness.

O'Connor was from childhood fascinated by birds of various kinds and at her mother's farm, Andalusia, she collected all manner of fowl: ducks, quail, mail-order swans and peacocks. At the age of five, she owned a chicken with a unique talent: it could walk both forwards and backwards. A cameraman was sent to record the bizarre phenomenon, and she insisted that this event marked the high point of her life, for everything after that came as an anticlimax. Her interest in fowl continued undiminished in later life, and in an article in *Holiday Magazine* (September, 1961), entitled 'Living with a Peacock' she exposes the more comical aspects of living with, in her words, such a fickle bird, but she is also deep aware of the more serious aspect of his character as it is proven in 'The displaced person', where she employs the animal in its full symbolic role as the emblem of Christ and the Second Coming.

A second interest that reflects her serious-comic point of view is cartooning. Noted for her ability as a cartoonist even in high school, as a college undergraduate O'Connor contributed a weekly sketch to the campus newspaper¹¹. The method of the cartoonist is closely allied to that employed by O'Connor in her writing. Cartoons characteristically make a serious statement through ostensibly comic means, using exaggeration and emphasis. Even her major characters have certain *cartoon* qualities, for their essential aspects are delineated in absolutely sharp outlines. Finally, the satiric cartoon permits the artist to make his comment about the world through *distance and indirection*, again a method that is found throughout her fiction.

And lastly, she spent the last 13 years of her life in Milledgeville, most of them on crutches, her bones and joints ravaged by lupus. Toward her physical debility she maintained a public attitude of amused detachment, remarking: *The disease is of no consequence to my*

¹⁰ WALTERS, Dorothy. *Flannery O'Connor*. Twayne Publishers. Boston, 1973. Page 13.

¹¹ *Flannery O'Connor: The cartoons*. Publisher: Fantagraphics. July, 2012.

writing, since for that I use my head and not my feet¹². Commenting on her restricted daily schedule, she noted: *I write from nine to twelve, and spend the rest of the day recuperating from it*¹³. She was able to laugh in the gravest of circumstances: for instance, describing her self-portrait with a pheasant cock, she wrote: *I very much like the look of the pheasant cock. He has horns and a face like the Devil. The self-portrait was made . . . after a very acute siege. . . . I was taking cortisone which gives you what they call a moon face and my hair had fallen out to a large extent due to the high fever, so I looked pretty much like the portrait. When I painted it, I didn't look either at myself in the mirror or at the bird. I knew what we both looked like.*

However, her illness –as well as her father's early death, also of lupus- suggests an obvious source of a pervasive concern of her writing: omnipresent death and disaster. Her work is filled with depictions of violence, annihilation, the somber moment of the final crisis. She attributed her preoccupation to her religious background: *I'm a born Catholic and death has always been brother to my imagination. I can't imagine a story that doesn't properly end in it or in its foreshadowings*¹⁴.

O'Connor was born into a family with a long tradition of Catholic identification on both sides, and by her bedside on the Georgia farm were three books: a breviary, a Bible and the *Summa Theologica*, the book she read everyday for twenty minutes before sleeping in the belief that reading a lot of theology would make her writing bolder. When she went to the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa, she said, she *didn't know a short story from an ad in the newspaper*. Yet she quickly became a star there and *scared the boys to death with her irony*, as a teacher put it. Her Catholic heritage thus furnished a stable moral perspective from which she consistently views all. This is not to imply, however, that her work lacks relevance for the non-Catholic or even for the non-Christian audience. Her faith must be understood to decipher her meanings, but not necessarily accepted in full. Her concern is with the age-old issues of sin and salvation, the pervasive apathy and pride which sap the spirit of man in the secular city, and such concerns are widespread.

But how to describe the personality of the owner of such a fresh and strong creativity? *Mary Flannery was different*: a neighbor of hers, -interviewed by the manager of tours in her childhood home in Savanna in a video that is available online- gets out of such a trouble in a word. Probably because of being the only daughter to a dominating mother, O'Connor developed a withdrawn and introspective nature, and as a result of this an overwhelming and oppressive feeling of solitude made her sink, as she confessed in a moment of weakness. She was recalled by many of her friends and acquaintances as a shy girl, but if forced to choose among one of their description, I would select the one by Robert Penn Warren: *She had a subtle, and beautifully equilibrated intelligence and an eye that missed nothing, the twist of a mouth, the light of a leaf... I found her witty, shrewd and strangely serene; for you had the sense that she loved the world and even forgave nonsense, not too tardily*. In fact, her attentiveness is the key to create a world of her own for this disabled woman with reduced mobility, *condemned* to reduce to her habitat to the few square meters of a bedroom upholstered with railings and bars that eased her walking. This feeling of isolation, of being different, of not being able to hang out with others, was her companion until the end and it is a characteristic trait of her crude sense of humor the fact that she could laugh at a situation that would cause, without a doubt, a great deal of intimate suffering. As an example, in one of her cartoons she draw a girl in a ball, very similar to her, seated in a corner with outsized glasses, left alone and marginalized whilst merry couples dance here and there. The expression in her face is fixed in an stereotyped smile of liveliness and animation, and at the bottom her thoughts are written: *Oh, well, I can always be a Ph.D.*

¹² WALTERS, Dorothy. *Flannery O'Connor*. Twayne Publishers. Boston, 1973. Page 16.

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ WALTERS, Dorothy. *Flannery O'Connor*. Twayne Publishers. Boston, 1973. Page 16.

Maybe one of the reasons that caused her isolation was her critical mind, her ability to discover hypocrisy in a glimpse. As a result, her ironic and extremely scathing attitude won no allies and kept her estranged and distanced from others. Always dressed up with simplicity and plainness, of austere habits and completely devoted to her job, an undergraduate in Iowa described her as an anodyne person, *conventual and puritanical*. It took a long time and personal touch to become aware of her glaring intelligence, to start to know her really. Her image of a taciturn girl, her complete lack of a fair self-opinion, her modesty and humbleness impeded her talking about her own work.

The mystery and manners of her weird life, with plentiful of anecdotes, are much known because of her letters, and her occasional essays and articles have also been collected. She gave frequent, recycling talks on her own work, the writing of stories and the teaching of literature. Hundreds of doctoral dissertations¹⁵ and critical analyses have been written as well as many dozens of books parsing her every line and ruminating on grace, redemption, evil, love, transcendence and apocalyptic power.

Literary influences

The list of authors who have definitely influenced Flannery O'Connor's work increases and lengthens in proportion to the number of critics and reference manual consulted. But not to get lost due to some extravagant links, I preferred to look upon what she herself told, not an easy task for she was very reluctant to discuss this topic and it was only in private conversations, with friends and acquaintances, and just occasionally in a public speech, that she confessed her admiration towards a particular writer. In any case, according to the daring Dr. Montero y Gamíndez's thesis, there is no other conclusive influence out of the biblical one, considering all the other authors, literary trends and schools of thought superficially formers of her genuine art, providing her peculiar vision of life with certain aesthetical and technical resources. Nevertheless, a detailed comparative study on these so-called *indirect influences* would help us specially to penetrate into her work in an easier and more profitable fashion.

Her originality and singularity stands out when studying her in her context. The gothic-grotesque literature claims her as one of her most distinguished exponents, and she admitted through clenched teeth her inclusion in the miscellaneous collection of works entitled *Shouthern School* adding a sharp commentary: *Most of us are considered, I believe, to be unhappy combinations of Poe and Erskine Caldwell*. Yet, despite her intense protestations, certain elements in her work link undeniable with the mainstream of Southern literature, both traditional and modern. The frontier writers, in particular, are famed for their vivid coupling of humor with violence. Of Poe in particular she once said that her humorous short stories made her think for the first time in her life of the possibility to undertake a literary career¹⁶, and undoubtedly, this adjective, humorous, fits perfectly in her art's description.

Her works are pure comedy and have gags that inadvertently escape many readers, their eyes fixed on the gloomy and pessimistic part, in accordance to a common portrayal. To a certain extent, it can be integrated in the tradition of *border humor* –easy and crude jokes, rude language and tasteless, gaudy and coarse details-, but using it as a precious technique to transmit the gravest truths.

Flannery O'Connor admired Faulkner, Hawthorne and Nathanael West, authors to whom she addressed true praises, whose frequent fusion of violent and comic elements is particular noted in *The Hamlet*. But though O'Connor's contrapuntal manipulation of comic-serious elements allies her closely to many of her regional predecessors and contemporaries, she is assuredly much more than just a *Southern* writer. For instance, and according to the thesis

¹⁵ MONTERO Y GAMÍNDEZ, María Isabel. *Flannery O'Connor y su tratamiento del mal*. Tesis doctoral 55/84. Universidad Complutense de Madrid.

¹⁶ FRANK, Daniel. 'Flannery O'Connor shapes awn capital'. Atlanta Journal and Constitution. 22 July 1962. Page 7.

exposed in *Flannery O'Connor*, by Dorothy Walters¹⁷, her acute awareness of the essential absurdity which characterizes much of daily experience finds numerous analogues in Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, or, in modified form, Albert Camus, who poses the doctrine of the absurd at the center of his ideology. But we should bear in mind that despite her affinities with various impulses which distinguish contemporary writing, she is, in other respects, set apart in a category which is virtually unique. Although she works within the traditional frame of literary Realism, with its stress on the particularities of time, place, and sequential action, she is unconcerned with these as meaningful in themselves. Nor is she absorbed with personality as a prime of center interest. Thus, we do not find in her narratives the obsessive probing of sensibility which preoccupies Proust, Virginia Woolf or Henry James. Likewise, she is unconcerned to delineate *reality* after the manner of the Naturalists through the multiple accumulation of inconsequential detail. Reality, for her, finally resides not in the fact of experience nor in the subjective response to it but in the unchanging categories of truth divorced from transitory expression.

But this is not to say, however, that O'Connor emphasizes abstraction to the detriment of particularity. On the contrary, she is a master of the use of the concrete detail to individualize her action, of the art of *showing* as opposed to *telling*, bettering even the second Wittgenstein in his own theory. But the profuse concretion of her work points ever toward the level of high abstraction. She demonstrates again and again that the way up is first the way down, that ascension can occur only as the extension of an initially downward path whose turning point reveals itself as a necessary and shocking encounter with grace, as necessary and shocking the knocking off the horse on the way towards Damascus was, not referred exclusively to a nonchristian, a persecutor then converted, but also to the quotidian life of those of us who stupidly believe frequently ourselves to be *on the safe shore*, trying to master the daily conversion, a long discussed about word in *Mystery and manners* regarding literary production:

[Criticisms] point to the fact that there are not many Catholic artists and writers, at least in this country, and that those who do achieve anything in a creative way are usually converts.

And this links back to her religious background, beliefs and influences. As an orthodox Catholic, she embraces an established set of values, and she rejects all relativistic efforts to redefine the criteria of judgment. For her, the center of being is God, not man; and she dismisses as absurd humanistic attempts to delineate reality with man-made instruments, or to assess human behavior in terms of a relativistic ethic. She scorns the cult of progress and insists on the validity of original sin as the source of man's guilt and as the explanation of his faulty behavior. Man is fallen, and all his technological achievements cannot conceal the fact. She contends that the final realities of Sin, Atonement, and Redemption exist intact, and she does it in an age which has embraced relativism on all levels. Thus, O'Connor supports the invisible realm against the world of things, the unseen essence as against the objective manifestation.

Differing from Dr. Montero y Gamíndez, enthroning the Bible as the one and only source of inspiration when explaining spiritual references would leave out many important ones that would give a partial vision. One of her weakness was the work and thought of Teilhard de Chardin, who she studies in depth and on whom she wrote brainy and illuminating glosses in which it is possible to analyze how her feelings evolve. Without lessening her admiration towards his daring and forward-thinking theories about –in fact, the title 'Everything that rises must converge' is taken out directly from a quotation by him¹⁸–, O'Connor began to discern the

¹⁸ *Remain true to yourselves, but move ever upward toward greater consciousness and greater love. At the summit you will find yourselves united with all those who, from every direction, have made the same ascent. For everything that rises must converge.*

implicit risk in many of his ideas, especially for those readers who lacked in a suitable scientific training and in critic spirits. Eventually she took the stance of a profound respect for the brilliant personality of this heroic Jesuit, keeping distance and regarding some of his ideas with watchfulness. She sums up in a couple of lines her ambivalent opinion, a mixture of contradictory feelings, in her critical article of *Letter from a traveller*, where she wrote about its author: *These letters are further evidence that his life of faith and work can be emulated even though his books remain incomplete and dangerous*, to encounter finally a crucial clash in their sense of evil and original sin: Teilhard reject wholly this concept, which is, nevertheless, the cornerstone of her stories and novels, where the veritable existences of the Devil and of evil –deliberately and freely chosen by man- are seriously upheld and defended. To expose the agreements and shared points of their thoughts, I have just picked up some of the ones analyzed in Montero y Gamíndez's¹⁹. O'Connor applauded the bravery of this pioneer captivated by the search of a new idea of holiness and sanctity, a brand new type of spirituality that would fit better modern lifestyle, and also his conception of evil and sinfulness present in man, his isolation and lack of communication, his terrible lonesomeness. Besides, both coincide in apprehending the positive dimension of violence, not easily accepted yet real, and in their biblical sources and backgrounds.

Tratamiento del mal en su obra (Simplicissimus)

History is riddled with an almost infinite number of examples of the incredible attitude of a man who does not know how to reach God out of the way of sickness, disgrace, deceive, anguish, of sin. Flannery O'Connor points this with words that seem to echo those of Dostoevsky: *The writer has to make the corruption believable before he can make the grace meaningful. In order to make man's corruption believable*, violence coats the pages of her writings and death takes a considerable part in her novels. Violence and death are two key ideas and they are not, certainly not, a synonym of desperation or renounce to life, because it *has, for all its horror, been found by God to be worth dying for*, as the author has repeated constantly and unshakeably. By studying these two aspects in detail, we would have the tools to choose whether her absence would affect or not the artistic and the theological result of his literary work.

Almost every single one of her characters has the doubtful honor of embodying evilness and corruption in a grand variety of aspects, each of them more dispiriting and unforgivable: inexcusable religious ignorance, voluntary moral blindness, pure pharisaism o boastfulness of one's uprightness, an exotic atheism and a so refined iniquity that could only be designated as satanic. All of them, via that innate evilness that reveals itself in crimes or not ethic acts, are overcome by an experience of epiphany, the encounter of a moment of a raising of awareness that kindles an authentic existential jolt.

Some of these characters, just a sprinkling of them in fact, come to feel these epiphanies, potentially salvific, in a state of relative innocence or non-guilty ignorance; only a few of them are free of the human condition of sin that reveals itself in wicked acts or in an attitude of perennial spiritual immodesty, the most repulsive crime for Flannery O'Connor's biblical mentality. But in broad terms, the gallery of her incredible human portraits has a common denominator: all of them are alienated from God, from their neighbours and even apart from their true selves; tightened by the grip of a blinding pride, absorbed by the chosen and beloved sin, they reject God, all of them.

Curiously, I have been familiar with this excerpt for ages, as well as with O'Connor's work, but I had not realize about their convergence –so evident and obvious in the literal transcription of this sentence of his-, having not been encouraged the rise of this inkling by not reading Teilhard de Chardin in English.

¹⁹ For further reading: pages [393-419]

From within all the characters analyzed by Dr. Montero y Gamíndez, I have decided to focus on the figure that represents the perfect alienated, the psychopath par excellence, a selection that matches with one of the stories that was picked for an in-class study. The Misfit, from *A good man is hard to find*, is the desperate character who is in more detail described in O'Connor's writings. He responds to a wide range of interpretations; one of them, the most appealing to critics, is the portrayal of the clinic psychopath. Another elucidation is the religious allegory: the manslaughter symbolizes the rebellion of the fall; the murder of the grandmother at the highpoint of the story signifies a rejection to grace. Flannery O'Connor conveys a verbal image of him as a complex character, with such a economy of words that he becomes an impressive artistic attainment. His few words are words of resentment, and his bitterness and irritation turn into a life of criminal acts in which he takes pleasure.

The reading of the two stories seen in class displays concomitant female characters. Thus, Julian, from *Everything that rises must converge*, and the father from *A good man is hard to find*, are both failed men in their aspirations, constantly irritated with themselves and with what life provides, rise up like perpetual teenagers against the shielding cares of their dominating mothers, who, condescending, with pretensions of irreplaceable women, control and manipulate them at their liking. These mothers are surprisingly similar though social circumstances distinguish them in secondary details. Julian's mother, obsessed with keeping the appearance of grandeur, has a literary precedent in the grandmother killed by the Misfit. Both have a double scale of values and cause violent counteractions in their sons, awakening their worst instincts.

Flannery O'Connor's literary art is aimed at the juxtaposition of violence put into action and violence in language, and even her landscapes are subjected to this last one. It is very interesting, for example, the disturbance a simple description of a street in the capital holds - *The sky was a dying violet and the houses stood out darkly against it, bulbous liver-coloured monstrosities of a uniform ugliness though no two were alike..... Each house had a narrow collar of dirt around it in which sat, usually, a grubby child*²⁰. With an admirably technique, by mixing violent colours, grotesque comparisons and strident adjectives, a street is enclosed by a threatening and aggressive atmosphere and almost everyone would expect a rage outburst of its inhabitants.

The author herself explains her concern about violence saying that *serious* writers must give the main function in their work²¹. Thus she joins a series of distinguished catholic writers, the French Mauriac above all, with whom she shares the obsession with violence and its leading role in man's life. Yet both acknowledge nonetheless the danger of painting existence in a bleak picture, as if desperation were their fictions and their beliefs' driving force. The two of them considered impossible to give an accurate depiction of the modern world without underlining the continual violation of sacred laws. Mauriac would finally end his interpretation by proposing a theory that had a loyal resonance in O'Connor's thought: nobody can reach beatitude if he has not had before the power and possibility to condemn himself, and his sentence *maybe those who could have been saints are the only ones who are damned* could be long discussed, but seems to enclose the fundamentals of a forgotten truth: goodness is not passivity and lack of character or the impossibility to act in the opposed way, but a continual and passionate effort to defeat the wayward and capricious passions and to straighten the diverted inclinations. Flannery O'Connor will finished up this thought by assuring that disbelievers, or people with a feeble faith, are the ones to object to the representation of evilness and violence in her fiction, not seeing that man's life, specially a catholic one, *is a continuous action in which this world's godos are utilized to the fullest, both positive gifts and what Père Teilhard de Chardin calls passive diminishments*.

²⁰ Everything that rises must converge, buscar página.

²¹ *When we look at the serious fiction written by Catholics in these times, we do find a striking preoccupation whith what is seedy and evil and violent. Mystery and manners.*

Having considered this perspective, the realist and tough look that O'Connor gives to life is easier to understand. The author reveals herself impatient with man's resistance to accept and embrace that goodness *is something under construction* and with the insistence on the idea that its demeanour, often ugly and grotesque, has to be kept undercover or polished to embellish its real appearance. It is due to this that Flannery O'Connor felt a deep aversion to the sentimentalism she saw invading her American cosmos, which she saw as the no way out shortcut of the impossible dream of the attempt to being redeemed costlessly, a kind of resurrection without crucifixion. Sentimentalism is a mortal threat to modern man's religious sensitivity.

For this reason, it is not strange that she wanted to transform her *compassionate* readers and her conception of violence and death, many times the latter as a result of the first, as a remedy or cure to them: *In my own stories I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept the moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work* (Mystery and manners, 112). Her aim was to correct short-sighted vision, a widespread illness in a permissive society that tends to confuse freedom and licentiousness. The author disclosed a profound and obvious sympathy towards the characters who exerted themselves to take an interest in something more durable than *progress*, something more meaningful than being surrounded by pleasures and devote life to self-benefit. Furthermore, when she described other characters whose human limitations mean an opportunity, the reader can perceive in her attitude a personal interest that is closer to love than to justice.

The offered moment of grace, often rejected, is the essential part of every single one of her novels and stories, distinguishing it as a result of evilness, mistake, sin, catastrophe or tragedy. Every character has required an extreme situation to regain good judgment and be able to offer God a free response. This is the essence of Christian theology, every revelation is aimed to facilitate this communication, this communion.

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