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The Art of Excellence:
A Study of Flannery O'Connor's Use of Grotesquerie, Humor, and Religion in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories*

Melanie L. Hyman

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English at Longwood College, Farmville, Virginia, May, 1986.

The Art of Excellence:

A Study of Flannery O'Connor's Use of

Grotesquerie, Humor, and Religion in

A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories

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Introduction

When the American South is mentioned, hundreds of images immediately come to mind. At once, we conjure up thoughts of slavery, ignorance, and injustice. Yet simultaneously, we think of gracious hospitality, genteel aristocracy, and a docile beauty not to be found elsewhere. The South, it seems, is a feeling, and it is a difficult feeling to capture and express accurately on paper. Yet the South, particularly after World War I, produced many major American authors who captured the essence of this feeling quite beautifully and accurately. Flannery O'Connor is one such author. Panthea R. Broughton offers the following insight concerning such Southern productivity:

> The disruptions of the modern age, like those of the Renaissance, may themselves be responsible for an art of great, apocalyptic, vision and stature. Perhaps this is why so much insightful writing emerged after the First World War. And this is why so much of that insight was distinctly Southern. Because prewar

> America had so much faith in its ideals, the South in its traditions, disillusionment after debacle was all the more acute. (123)

We cannot say that Flannery O'Connor is a product of post-war disillusionment, for she is never disillusioned with her world; however, she definitely adheres to a post-war way of thinking and, in turn, writing.

Even now, over twenty years after her death, O'Connor's writing is exciting and alive. As Alfred Kazin notes in _Three By Flannery O'Connor_, "Her writing style is highly unladylike . . . a brutal irony, a slam bang humor and a style of writing as balefully direct as a death sentence" (1). O'Connor is ever aware of the old South's ideals and traditions, and never afraid to tear them apart with her sarcasm and wit. She does this not as a condescending outsider, though, for she is an authority on the South. The South is her "true country," and she writes of it and its inhabitants with fantastic realism and authenticity. We see her characters on the streets of any small Southern town. We know their names--or ones like them--June Star, Bevel Summers, Hoover Shoats. And we hear her black or wealthy white or poor white dialects as we read her dialogues. We understand her mastery of realistically portraying the South as we first read any one of her works. Closer study reveals the core of O'Connor's work--her individual writing style. Three

major writing elements are the crux of this style. Though she learned much stylistically from other writers, her perfection of these elements made her the unique talent she was.

First, and perhaps most striking in Flannery O'Connor's work, is her very effective use of the technique of literary grotesquerie--a technique which at the same time stuns and captures the imagination with aberrant characterization that often includes physical or mental deformity, and plots that not only surprise, but also horrify. Second, is the tone of humor, used perhaps somehow to offset the grotesque--her characters are forever saying and doing outrageous things. Her humorous tone is extremely effective because it catches the reader when he least expects it. Finally, O'Connor's third element is her most basic theme of the individual's dealings with religion. Flannery O'Connor, a devout Roman Catholic living in the predominantly Baptist Bible Belt, was a bit of an alien in her own home. A combination of her deep religious convictions, juxtaposed with those of her Protestant Fundamentalist neighbors, and her alienation, caused her to produce some profoundly religious work.

Since O'Connor's death on August 3, 1964, most of the literary criticism has dealt solely with her religious themes--making her out to be more of a

theologian than a master of an art form. The beauty of O'Connor's writing is its universal readability, its earthiness, its humor, and its exacting jabs at human nature. She is, as she once described herself, a writer with Christian concerns, but these are not her only thematic concerns. This thesis shall study Flannery O'Connor as a Southern writer--an artist, rather than a prophet or theologian. By studying the short stories in _A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories_, it will delve into her three primary stylistic elements: her technique of grotesquerie, her humorous tone, and her use of religion as a theme. These elements cannot really be separated in an analysis; they are actually perfectly blended in her fiction.

Lorine M. Getz touches on this blending of elements in _Flannery O'Connor: Her Life, Library and Book Reviews_:

> Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964), America's greatest post-World War II short story writer, uniquely represents the convergence of Roman Catholicism and the American South. Her significance as an artist arises from this convergence. No other writer has so keenly grasped the artistic possibilities present within this combination, and no other has so tensely depicted them. Creatively combining religious motifs she

> found in the Protestant fundamentalism of her region, with its emphasis on an apocalyptic and avenging God, and her own Roman Catholicism, with its emphasis on the transforming, sacramental presence of God, within the mundane particularity of everyday concerns, O'Connor explores the essential Christian questions. Her short stories and novels depict characters and events in ways which illuminate, in strange settings of alienation and chaos, the relationship between God and humanity described as "action of grace." (v)

And so it is this convergence of her talents that we must study; for O'Connor is more than, as one critic put it, "a fierce Roman Catholic who wrote like a witch" (Friedman and Lawson 210).

She is more too than the regional writer or Southern Gothic writer she has sometimes been accused of being. According to Robert Drake, too many of O'Connor's critics

> are not properly concerned with fiction as an art form but, rather, with fiction as an embodiment of psychological commentary or political and sociological ideology . . . . All seem to find, as so many have mistakenly found in Faulkner, ample evidence in her

> fiction to substantiate their horror and outrage at that dark and bloody land of moonlight lynchings and festering magnolias. (7)

What one must do fully to understand and appreciate the O'Connor phenomenon is to study the entire O'Connor story. Equally as enchanting as her works are her published letters to friends, students, and admirers; her reviews and criticism of other literary works; and especially, her biographical background.

Mary Flannery O'Connor was born to Regina Cline and Edwin Francis O'Connor on March 25, 1925, in Savannah, Georgia. She was an only child and early photographs show a beautiful, healthy girl with intelligent eyes and a precocious demeanor. The family lived in Savannah until the late 1930's when Mr. O'Connor developed disseminated lupus, a degenerative disease with no apparent cure.

At this time the family moved to Milledgeville, Georgia, and lived in the Cline family home, a beautiful, columned antebellum structure. In 1941 Mr. O'Connor died and a season later his daughter enrolled in the Georgia State College for Women. From 1945 to 1947 she attended Iowa State University where she earned her Master of Fine Arts degree. During this period she decided to drop the Mary from her name, and in 1946 "The Geranium," her first short story, was published. From 1947 to 1950 O'Connor first lived at Yaddo Writers'

Colony in Saratoga Springs, New York, and then in New York City and Connecticut with her friends Sally and Robert Fitzgerald. In 1950 at age twenty-five, Flannery O'Connor's writing career had just taken off; she was well on her way to becoming an acclaimed author. But a tragic twist of fate, not unlike an incident out of one of her stories, occurred in the winter of 1950. She was stricken with lupus, the identical disease that had killed her father approximately ten years earlier. She was professionally undaunted by this tragedy, but she was forced for medical reasons to move back to Georgia and live with her mother. The two moved to their lovely family farm, Andalusia of Milledgeville, where she lived for the remainder of her life.

In his introduction to _Flannery O'Connor: The Complete Stories_, Robert Giroux relays the touching story of O'Connor's first meeting with Paul Engle, the teacher who accepted her into his Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa. Flannery O'Connor was twenty-one at the time:

> At their first meeting in his office, in 1946, Mr. Engle recalls, he was unable to understand a word of Flannery's native Georgian tongue:
>
> "Embarrassed, I asked her to write down what she had just said on a pad. She wrote:

'My name is Flannery O'Connor. I am not a journalist. Can I come to the Writer's Workshop?' . . . I told her to bring examples of her writing and we would consider her, late as it was. Like Keats, who spoke Cockney but wrote the purest sounds in English, Flannery spoke a dialect beyond instant comprehension but on the page her prose was imaginative, tough, alive: just like Flannery herself. For a few weeks we had this strange yet trusting relationship. Soon I understood those Georgia pronunciations. The stories were quietly filled with insight, shrewd about human weakness, hard and compassionate . . . . The will to be a writer was adamant; nothing could resist it, not even her own sensibility about her work. Cut, alter, try it again . . . . Sitting at the back of the room, silent, Flannery was more of a presence than the exuberant talkers who serenade every writing class with their loudness. The only communicating gesture she would make was an occasional amused and shy smile at something absurd. The dreary chair she sat in glowed." (vii-viii)

We all lost a great deal when Flannery O'Connor died in 1964. In 1972 her <u>Collected Stories</u> was awarded the

National Book Award, and it seems her popularity has grown with each passing year.

An inexperienced O'Connor reader is probably first struck by the author's technique of grotesquerie. It is natural to question the purpose of this repeated use of distortion that at times seems to overpower many of her short stories. According to Dorothy Tuck McFarland's _Flannery O'Connor_,

> Like the caricaturist, who uses exaggeration and distortion in order to emphasize the character of his subject, O'Connor created bizarre characters or extreme situations in order to attain deeper kinds of realism than the sociological realism that she felt the popular spirit of the mid-twentieth century demanded of the writer. (3)

Answering the same question in _Mystery and Manners_, O'Connor herself says:

> Whenever I'm asked why southern writers particularly have a penchant for writing about freaks, I say it is because we are still able to recognize one. To be able to recognize a freak, you have to have some conception of the whole man, and in the South the general conception of the whole man, is still, in the main, theological. (44)

Though O'Connor's writing style is not at all conserva-

tive, her concept here (and she includes herself in "we are still able . . .") of the "whole man" is conservative--even fundamentalist--and typically Southern. The paradox then is O'Connor's writing style versus her beliefs, her morals, her religion. How could an author who sees herself as a Christian writer portray religion as she appears to do in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find"? How is it that many of her characters are so falsely pious, so over-zealous, such hypocrites? How could her psychopathic murdering Misfit actually compare himself to Jesus Christ?

Obviously O'Connor is not attacking God or religion. Instead she is attacking human beings' dealings with religion; she is exposing their hypocrisies; and, most importantly, she is revealing their extremely limited understanding of God, of religion, of everything in terms of "mystery," of existence. In her stories her characters' initial ignorance is always countered by a final greater understanding of this mystery. In the _Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms_, edited by Harry Shaw, the word "epiphany" is defined as "an intuitive and sudden insight into the reality and basic meaning of an event; a literary work, or part of a work, that symbolically presents such a moment of perception and revelation" (100). Epiphany for O'Connor's characters in need is the end result and a definite recurring theme in most of her works. In _Mystery and Manners_ she

writes of her Christian themes,

> I have heard it said that belief in Christian dogma is a hindrance to the writer, but I myself have found nothing further from the truth. Actually, it frees the storyteller to observe. It is not a set of rules which fixes what he sees in the world. It affects his writing primarily by guaranteeing his respect for mystery. (31)

In other words, she feels as a Christian writer she has her life in proverbial order; and, therefore, she is free to watch others struggle for what she has already found. Life is replete with mysteries we cannot explain, and O'Connor is able to accept these as God's mysteries.

She is also able to accept other religious sects and denominations and to write about them with wonderful humor. Though she is a Catholic, she produces hilarious scenes about the backwoods Baptist or Holiness churches because she is an insider. Stanley Edgar Hyman quotes her as saying,

> "Now the South is a good place for a Catholic in literature in my sense for a number of reasons. 1) In the South belief can still be made believable and in relation to a large part of the society. We're not in the Bible Belt for nothing. 2) The Bible being generally known and revered in the section,

> gives the novelist that broad mythical base to refer to that he needs to extend his meaning in depth. 3) The South has a sacramental view of life . . . 4) The aspect of Protestantism that is most prominent (at least to a Catholic) in the South is that of man dealing with God directly, not through the mediation of the church, and this is great for the Catholic novelist like myself who wants to get close to his character and watch him wrestle with the Lord." (41)

Louis D. Rubin also recalls her comment that "the Catholic 'will feel a great deal more kinship with the backwoods prophets and shouting fundamentalists than he will with those politer elements for whom the supernatural is an embarrassment and for whom religion has become a department of sociology or culture or personality development'" (61-62).

In terms of style, Flannery O'Connor's use of religion as a theme overlaps her grotesquerie, which in turn overlaps her humor. Christian ideals are present in each of her works, but they are not necessarily the only thrust or the strongest theme of her work. Rather than a theologian, O'Connor is an observer of and commentator on humankind. O'Connor herself states, "'So many students approach a story as if it were a

problem in algebra; find X and when they find X they can discuss the rest of it'" (Rubin 71). In the Flannery O'Connor Bulletin, Rubin states,

> That is what I feel so uncomfortable with about so much that has been written about her stories. Find X--find the act of grace, find the religious theme, and nothing else matters. It may be good exegetical theology; it makes for wretched literary criticism, for it ignores the richness and mystery in order to fasten upon the immediately usable. It reduces the gallery of characters with whom the O'Connor fiction is peopled, that magnificently motley company of Southerners, to the level of one-dimensional figures in a latterday morality play. (71)

Any reader solely interested in critiquing O'Connor's work from a theological standpoint is missing the vast wealth of her artistic work. It would be the same as seeing her only as a writer of grotesquerie, or only as a humorist. Her strength lies in these three stylistic elements, not in a single one.

The origins of O'Connor's fascination with life's oddities can be traced to a childhood experience when she owned a chicken that could walk both forward and backward. She was so excited by this bird and by the attention she received when the local news ran a story

about her, that her interest became a "passion, a quest" (McFarland 6). In Mystery and Manners O'Connor writes, tongue in cheek,

> When I was five, I had an experience that marked me for life. Pathé News sent a photographer from New York to take a picture of a chicken of mine. This chicken, a buff Cochin Bantam, had the distinction of being able to walk either forward or backward. Her fame had spread through the press, and by the time she reached the attention of Pathé News, I suppose there was nowhere left for her to go--forward or backward. Shortly after that she died, as now seems fitting. (3)

After this incident O'Connor began collecting all sorts of unusual birds--the stranger the better. McFarland quotes her as saying, "'I favored those with one green eye and one orange or with overlong necks and crooked combs. I wanted one with three legs or three wings but nothing in that line turned up'" (6).

These personal insights say much about Flannery O'Connor, the woman. She knows that her fascination with the grotesque is a bit strange, and she has an excellent sense of humor--she is strong enough to laugh at herself. At any rate, her birds evidently made great character studies, for the reader of her fiction

meets up with a whole menagerie of bizarre individuals. In Flannery O'Connor, McFarland writes,

> Certainly her fascination with incongruity ran deep; it is present in all of her writings both stylistically and thematically. Incongruity embodied for her a fundamental human reality: man's experience of himself as a creature of both flesh and spirit, a being that is rooted in nature but that longs to transcend nature. (6)

In other words, just as her odd birds are trapped in their misshapen bodies, so are her literary characters trapped in their warped minds and deformed bodies; so is she trapped by her earthly limitations; so are we all trapped.

To understand why O'Connor perhaps felt trapped "by the flesh" is to understand her literature and to delve into her psyche. She writes as if her own impending death is compelling her. However, she is quoted by Carol Shloss as saying, "'The disease is of no consequence to my writing, since for that I use my head and not my feet'" (6). Naturally a dying person looks at life differently than a healthy person; thus, a dying writer must write differently. McFarland feels that

> Certainly the stories she wrote after the onset of her illness were different from

> those that preceded it, both in sheer power and in the insistent presence in them of questions raised in such a way as to preclude any answers. Her illness did not, of course, change her fundamental view of life, but it brought home to her the experience of human limitation . . . . (9)

We see O'Connor's best use of this theme of human limitation or religion, the technique of grotesquerie, and the humorous tone in the stories which appear in her first volume of short fiction, _A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories_, published in 1955 when she was thirty. These elements are used most effectively in three stories: "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," "The Artificial Nigger," and "Good Country People." Following chronological order, one finds also an order of quality, with "Good Country People" being the most workable, most successful story of the three. Each story shares numerous similarities with the other two and ends with an epiphany for the protagonist. Blending these elements, Flannery O'Connor touches on all aspects of human nature without ever leaving the realm of the South.

Chapter I

"A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is O'Connor's most celebrated short story. After publication it met with critical approval, and the story has since been included in most American literature anthologies. Nearly all high school English classes read this story that was written in 1953 when O'Connor was only twenty-seven. "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is a seemingly simple story of a family going from Georgia to Florida for summer vacation. With them travels their delightfully ignorant grandmother who becomes the protagonist of the story. Unlike the other characters in this story who remain somewhat flat throughout, the grandmother is comically alive with mischief. In keeping with O'Connor's use of grotesquerie and irony, the grandmother is not as she should be. This character is not a typical loving, giving grandmother. Instead, O'Connor gives us a selfish, manipulative prude who happens to say and do some very funny things.

After reading a newspaper article, the grandmother worries that her family will meet up with "The Misfit," an escaped criminal also, ironically, headed for Florida. She reads from the article:

> "The Misfit is aloose from the Federal Pen and headed toward Florida and you just read here what it says he did to these people. Just you read it. I wouldn't take my children in any direction with a criminal like that aloose in it. I couldn't answer to my conscience if I did."[1]

The family is always irritated and annoyed by the grandmother and pays her no attention. Actually, the entire group here can be added to O'Connor's cast of freaks. The family dynamics are so poor that there is almost no interaction between family members--definitely no positive interaction. The children are terribly rude to their grandmother, Bailey is so hateful to his mother that the reader can feel the friction, and Bailey's wife is so stupid, she barely utters a word throughout the entire story. O'Connor describes the wife's face as being "as broad and innocent as a cabbage" (117). In fact, the only thing she seems able to to is produce offspring. These people are so dull and ignorant, all the reader can do is laugh and be thankful not to be included in their journey to Florida.

Eventually we discover the reason the grandmother doesn't want to go to Florida is that she wants to go

[1] All quotations from O'Connor's stories are found in *Flannery O'Connor: The Complete Stories*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975).

to Tennessee. In her most sincere and funny voice she says, "'You ought to take them somewhere else for a change so they would see different parts of the world and be broad'" (117). Europe? Never. Tennessee? Definitely! And so, in the first few paragraphs we discover the grandmother's manipulative nature and her lack of sophistication.

The first part of the story is actually funnier than it is grotesque. O'Connor lures us into liking this story with excellent characterization and comic irony. Her real forte here is her dialogue. One scene that comes to mind is when the grandmother scolds her grandchildren for calling Georgia a lousy state:

> "In my time, children were more respectful of their native states and their parents and everything else. People did right then. Oh look at that cute little pickaninny! Wouldn't that make a picture, now?" (117)

Here she is so caught up in lecturing about "her" idea of good manners (which of course includes being respectful of one's native state, but not of blacks) that she never once realizes the incongruity of her statements. This--missing the fine tuning and only seeing the surface--is the grandmother's character. She is not multi-dimensional in that sense; she sees black and white--no shades of gray.

For her trip she dresses in a navy blue dress with white cuffs and collars, and a sachet of purple violets so that "in case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once she was a lady" (118). Her attention to such trivial detail is perfectly befitting her narrow-minded ignorance. And yet, the grandmother is likable, and the reader might even laugh out loud at the following story she tells her grandchildren:

> She said once when she was a maiden lady she had been courted by a Mr. Edgar Atkins Teagarden from Jasper, Georgia. She said he was a very good-looking man and a gentleman and that he brought her a watermelon every Saturday afternoon with his initials cut in it, E.A.T. Well, one Saturday, she said Mr. Teagarden brought the watermelon and there was nobody home and he left it on the front porch and returned in his buggy to Jasper, but she never got the watermelon, she said, because a nigger boy ate it when he saw the initials E.A.T.! (120)

As the trip to Florida progresses a perceptible change in the humor of the story occurs. The humor becomes darker--mixed with more and more grotesquerie. This change is sensed as the family stops at the Tower, a part stucco, part wood filling station and dance hall, for lunch. There is a definite circus freak-show

atmosphere to this scene as the family first sees a monkey outside chained to a tree, and meets the owner, Red Sammy Butts. Everything about this scene is grotesque--the ridiculous building, the monkey, and especially Red Sammy. As usual O'Connor has named her character appropriately: "His khaki trousers reached just to his hip bones and his stomach hung over them like a sack of meal swaying under his shirt" (121).

Aside from the descriptive excellence and accuracy of this scene (naturally _this_ family would stop at a combination gas station/dance hall for lunch), two important events occur at Sammy's that are necessary for the continuity and structure of the story. First, the grandmother discusses The Misfit with Red Sammy. This discussion of course serves as foreshadowing as the reader is alerted to the second mentioning of The Misfit. O'Connor uses this opportunity to tie unrelated incidents together and also to increase the importance of the character of The Misfit. The second event is Red Sammy's off-the-cuff cliche, "A good man is hard to find" (122). Thus, in what is typical O'Connor style, one of her most grotesque characters, obese, sweaty Red Sammy, announces the theme of her story. Yes, he is unsophisticated, but he holds an important key to the story. He has extreme limitations, like so many of her characters; but his limitations are no worse than any of ours--different maybe, but not

worse. We sense that Flannery O'Connor has a great deal of sensitivity for her characters. She laughs at their habits and mannerisms, but her air is not one of superiority. Rather it is one of understanding. In a letter to a friend reprinted in The Habit of Being, she writes,

> About the vacuum my writing seems to create as to (I suppose) a love of people--I won't say the poor, because I don't like to distinguish them. Everybody, as far as I am concerned, is The Poor . . . I suppose it is true however, that one's personal affection for people or lack of it carries over and colors the work. (103)

Her belief that "everybody . . . is The Poor" is an important key to understanding and appreciating Flannery O'Connor, and it ties in perfectly with her use of the theme of human limitation.

Just as important as the characterization of this section is the statement itself, "a good man is hard to find." On the surface, in this story at least, a good man does not exist. The grandmother is not a good grandmother, Bailey is not a good son, the grandchildren are not good grandchildren, and The Misfit is anything but good. So Red Sammy's statement and the title of the story are at once linked together, and both serve as factual statements and ironic foreshadowing.

The macabre irony of action in this seemingly simple story occurs just after lunch at Red Sammy's. At the grandmother's request, the family takes a side trip down a deserted road and has a car accident. Angry that his mother wants to lengthen their trip with an unnecessary excursion to an abandoned Southern plantation, Bailey takes the old dirt road she thinks she remembers:

> "It's not much farther," the grandmother said and just as she said it, a horrible thought came to her. The thought was so embarrassing that she turned red in the face and her eyes dilated and her feet jumped up, upsetting the valise in the corner. The instant the valise moved, the newspaper top she had over the basket under it rose with a snarl and Pitty Sing, the cat, sprang onto Bailey's shoulder. (124)

Havoc follows, but when the car finally stops rolling, all emerge basically unharmed. The horrible thought the grandmother had was that the plantation she remembered was in Tennessee, not Georgia--they are in the wrong state! She leaves the car guiltily, never revealing her mistake, saying only, "'I believe I have injured an organ'" (124).

Here the twist of the story comes in. Marooned, the family is at the mercy of any stranger who might

stop to help them. O'Connor's foreshadowing has prepared the reader for "who" will "rescue" the family. The reader is not as prepared, however, for the violent actions about to be committed against the family. At any rate, to the horror of these characters, it is of course The Misfit who stops to "rescue" them. What irony! The grandmother is the one character afraid of and concerned about The Misfit--the one who preaches vehemently against going anywhere near Florida--and in the end, it is she who causes the meeting with The Misfit, and the eventual demise of her family. So it is the grandmother who needs to be reckoned with--and reckoned with she is. She is even transformed in some very important ways by the end of the story.

From the accident to the conclusion of the story, the once light-hearted humor is replaced by bleak and horrible circumstances--events which call for extensive study. O'Connor's change in tone is perhaps too drastic here; the reader wonders how this change occurred so rapidly. At any rate, we soon see that humor is not O'Connor's only forte; her descriptive imagery and foreshadowing are exacting in the following passage:

> The grandmother stood up and waved both arms dramatically to attract their attention. The car continued to come on slowly, disappeared around a bend and appeared again, moving even

> slower, on top of the hill they had gone over. It was a big black battered hearse-like automobile. There were three men in it. (125-126)

O'Connor tantalizes us with the slow approach of this "hearse-like" vehicle, and from the moment the grandmother recognizes The Misfit to the end, the story mesmerizes the reader. We feel the family's intense fear and the shock and terror the grandmother experiences as she realizes these greasy rednecks are killing her family one at a time. The scene is so real, so pitiful, as Bailey, being dragged off to be murdered, clings to the one person each of us would cling to in a panic situation--his mother:

> "Listen," Bailey began, "we're in a terrible predicament! Nobody realizes what this is," and his voice cracked . . . . They went off towards the woods and just as they reached the dark edge, Bailey turned and supporting himself against a gray naked pine trunk, he shouted,
>
> "I'll be back in a minute, Mamma, wait on me!"
>
> "Come back here this instant!" his mother shrilled but they all disappeared into the woods. "Bailey boy!" the grandmother called in a tragic voice . . . . (128)

This tragic exchange is the only real dialogue of any importance between Bailey and his mother. Yet with it she loses her only son.

At this point the real story begins, and with her loss the grandmother gains strength. In shock, but lucid enough to try to reason with The Misfit, she appeals to his self-worth, an act which is of course ludicrous. At this point, the grandmother's epiphany or transformation begins, but it does not come easily. She holds fast to her superficiality by offering The Misfit one of Bailey's shirts when he apologizes for not having one on, and by telling him he is a good man, not at all common. She is the woman, after all, who worried about what to wear in the event of an accident.

This ridiculous, overly polite Southern banter that takes place between the grandmother and The Misfit is an important part of the dark comedy of the second half of this tale. The Misfit is sorry for not wearing a shirt in the presence of ladies; he says "yes'm" and "nome" to everything the grandmother asks; he politely tells Hiram, his accomplice, to "hep that lady up" (131), as he takes the mother to be shot. The whole scene is inane, but so in keeping with the old Confederate saying, "Death before Dishonor." A Southern boy says yes ma'am to every woman, whether he is going to kill her or not.

Through this dark comedy, through the grandmother's

trite, old-fashioned beliefs in what it is to be a lady, and what it is to be proper, polite, and "good," O'Connor is exposing what is unimportant in life. Throughout the entire story the grandmother has needed to come to terms with what is real, what is important in life. She does not face this until the very end of the story where for one instant she really sees The Misfit. She does not judge him; she does not see him in terms of good or bad. She does not even think about what type of "people" he comes from. She has lost Bailey, and for one moment, The Misfit becomes her second son:

> His voice seemed about to crack and the grandmother's head cleared for an instant. She saw the man's face twisted close to her own as if he were going to cry and she murmured, "Why you're one of my own babies. You're one of my own children!" She reached out and touched him on the shoulder. The Misfit sprang back as if a snake had bitten him and shot her three times through the chest. (132)

The grandmother's epiphany here is dragged from her by these horrifying, unnatural circumstances. If left alone, the grandmother's character would have remained unchanged. So it is this seemingly negative experience which becomes the catalyst for the grand-

mother's epiphany. The irony here is that her conversion leads directly to her death. About this scene and the ending of the story, O'Connor explains,

> "'A Good Man Is Hard to Find' has been written badly from the orthodox Christian view of the world. I think we seldom realize just how deliberately we have to change our sights just to read such a piece of fiction. It is a view of the world which is offensive to modern thought and particularly to modern feeling. It is a view of the world which sees the life of the body as less important than the life of the soul, and the happiness of the individual as secondary to his observance of truth and his practice of charity." (Stephens 36)

If O'Connor sees the "life of the soul" as all important, and it is The Misfit who is the catalyst for the birth of the grandmother's soul, how are we to view The Misfit? First we must consider all that he says.

As the concluding scene begins, The Misfit is immediately in control. He starts by correcting the grandmother as to how many times the car turned over; yet, he is friendly. And The Misfit's physical appearance is not quite what we would expect. O'Connor makes him human, almost intelligent-looking: "his hair was just beginning to gray and he wore silver-rimmed spectacles that gave him a scholarly look . . . When

he smiled he showed a row of strong white teeth" (126-127). In The Habit of Being, O'Connor says of her character, "The Misfit, of course, is a spoiled prophet. He could go on to great things" (465). We can imagine this at our first meeting with The Misfit. He has a sort of Billy Graham appearance--another "all is not as it seems" technique of O'Connor's. But then of course The Misfit's grotesqueness or deformity is not physical; it is psychological. Because of the severity of his psychological problems, we wonder what great things he might have done.

However, The Misfit is a prophet of sorts, and after several pages of terrifying dialogue, and the murders of all except the grandmother, The Misfit discusses his ideology. He first explains his name: "'I call myself The Misfit because I can't make what all I done wrong fit with all I gone through in punishment'" (131). What a sad and realistic commentary on the life of such a man. And what an appropriate name O'Connor chose for her psychopath. We sense her sympathy for him in that name; he is not The Mauler, or The Executioner, simply The Misfit. We too sympathize with him when he asks, "'Does it seem right to you, lady, that one is punished a heap and another ain't punished at all?'" (131) Surely, it seems, O'Connor is asking us a rhetorical question about our society--what kind of society is it that produces such misfits?

We further learn about The Misfit and his twisted religious ideas as he explains to the grandmother,

> "Jesus thown everything off balance. Jesus was the only one that ever raised the dead and He shouldn't have done it. If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can--by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness." (132)

Although The Misfit is sick, his thinking is somewhat logical--go one way or the other--decide what you believe and follow that belief. O'Connor tends to go along with this line of thinking. She has no sympathy for agnostics.

With his speech about his religion The Misfit probably exhausts most readers' sympathy for him, and seconds later when the grandmother reaches out (literally and figuratively) for The Misfit, he kills her. His final statement is, "'It's no real pleasure in life'" (133). The reader is left shocked and questioning. What has happened here? What purpose has The Misfit served? Eventually we come to terms with the fact that The Misfit is the grandmother's catalyst. His purpose in the story is to move the grandmother (i.e., the reader) to deeper understanding--deeper

realization. And in turn, the grandmother serves as a catalyst for him. At first his religion is set in his mind. He chooses not to believe and therefore to have fun doing all the meanness he can. The grandmother challenges The Misfit's lack of faith; and, just before he shoots her, he seems almost to have a religious conversion himself:

> "Maybe he didn't raise the dead," the old lady mumbled, not knowing what she was saying and feeling so dizzy that she sank down in a ditch with her legs twisted under her.
>
> "I wasn't there so I can't say He didn't," The Misfit said. "I wisht I had been there," he said, hitting the ground with his fist. "It ain't right I wasn't there because if I had of been there I would of known. Listen lady," he said in a high voice, "If I had of been there I would of known and I wouldn't be like I am now." His voice seemed to crack and the grandmother's head cleared for an instant. (132)

And so The Misfit's realization in the end is that there is really no pleasure in meanness after all, and because of this realization, O'Connor sees hope for him.

The final statement The Misfit makes about the grandmother is at first puzzling. He says,"'She would of been a good woman if it had been somebody there to

shoot her every minute of her life'" (133). Of course we would all be "good" if we had somebody there to shoot us every minute--someone to keep us in line with such pressure--but does O'Connor believe that humans are innately evil--only good when forced to be so? Rather, it seems she is saying we all need a catalyst, just as these two characters needed one, to experience true spiritual acceptance and, to the best of our abilities, spiritual understanding.

Although there is a drastic change of tone from the beginning of this story to the end, we must view the ending of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" as positive. To do O'Connor and ourselves justice, we cannot stop at the violence and horror of the story. We must search deeper, and we must remember the wonderful humor of the first half of this work. In her usual dead-pan voice, Flannery O'Connor discusses this story in Mystery and Manners:

> This story has been called grotesque, but I prefer to call it literal. A good story is literal in the same sense a child's drawing is literal. When a child draws he doesn't intend to distort but to set down exactly what he sees, and as his gaze is direct, he sees the lines that create motion. Now the lines of motion that interest the writer are usually invisible. They are lines of spiritual

> motion. And in this story you should be on the lookout for such things as the action of grace in the grandmother's soul, and not for dead bodies. (113)

O'Connor further discusses her intent in a letter to a friend, later published in The Habit of Being:

> I am mighty tired of reading reviews that call "A Good Man" brutal and sarcastic. The stories are hard but they are hard because there is nothing harder or less sentimental than Christian realism. I believe that there are many rough beasts now slouching toward Bethlehem to be born and that I have reported the progress of a few of them, and when I see these stories I am amused because the reviewer always has hold of the wrong horror. (90)

We must be careful in interpreting Flannery O'Connor's work not to "have hold of the wrong horror." We must view her work as a whole, remembering all the isolated incidents and each literary element, but never drawing definitive conclusions about them individually. Each element in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," the grotesquerie, the humor, and the religion, is a cog in O'Connor's literary wheel. "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is an excellent story to begin with in studying O'Connor's works because in it her stylistic elements are so vivid.

It is also good to begin with in terms of O'Connor's own literary growth. The shift in tone from the opening scene of the story to the scene after the accident represents a slight weakness, a stylistic inconsistency. It is such a weakness that we will see her avoid in later stories.

Chapter II

After studying "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," the reader is prepared for certain recurring themes and literary devices in Flannery O'Connor's works. The reader expects to meet characters who are in some way physically or psychologically grotesque, but who are also humorous or involved in humorous incidents. He is prepared to read about some shocking or horrible event involving the same people, with a spiritual rejuvenation in the end for those who most need it.

With all this in mind, we approach "The Artificial Nigger," a story O'Connor wrote in 1955, two years after she wrote "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," and several months before she wrote "Good Country People." That this story comes between the other two is interesting. It is apparent with "The Artificial Nigger" and "Good Country People" that O'Connor's writing style and grasp of the short story as a literary genre are reaching a technically superior peak. Whereas "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" has sometimes been viewed as being overpoweringly grotesque and enigmatic, these two later stories seem to flow more smoothly. The grotesque, the humor, the religious implications are all here, but

these two stories seem to work better because there is no drastic change in direction.

"A Good Man Is Hard to Find" could almost have two distinctly different chapters--before the accident and after the accident. Though it is an excellent work filled with some of O'Connor's best humor, the ending is almost too much to digest without a great deal of study and insight into Flannery O'Connor, the woman. As a less experienced writer perhaps she was overly concerned with writing technique--with making "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" work. By the time she wrote these two later stories she seemed to have better control over the art of writing a short story. Maybe "The Artificial Nigger" works well because the action of the story, the circumstances, are close to O'Connor. Certainly when she left the security of Milledgeville for the first time to travel to the city she must have shared similar anxieties with those Mr. Head and Nelson experience on their trip to Atlanta. At any rate, this story of "country come to town" seems to flow naturally from O'Connor.

The story opens in a humorous tone as Mr. Head, the grandfather, wakes in the middle of the night and surveys his bedroom in the moonlight: "The straight chair against the wall looked stiff and attentive as if it were awaiting an order and Mr. Head's trousers, hanging to the back of it, had an almost noble air, like the

garment some great man had just flung to his servant; but the face on the moon was a grave one" (249). O'Connor's narration is excellent here. It has the singular quality of presenting the story omnisciently while at the same time making the reader feel all is told from Mr. Head's viewpoint. Her foreshadowing about the face on the moon tells us that this will not be a mere pleasure trip to the city. With her narration we see immediately that Mr. Head views himself as a noble man: "Mr. Head could have said that age was a choice blessing and that only with years does a man enter into that calm understanding of life that makes him a suitable guide for the young. This, at least, had been his own experience" (249). O'Connor further emphasizes how Mr. Head sees himself in the following passage:

> The alarm on the clock did not work but he was not dependent on any mechanical means to awaken him. Sixty years had not dulled his responses; his physical reactions, like his moral ones, were guided by his will and strong character, and these could be seen plainly in his features. He had a long tube-like face with a long rounded open jaw and a long depressed nose. His eyes were alert but quiet, and in the miraculous moonlight they had a look of composure and of ancient wisdom

> as if they belonged to one of the great guides of men. He might have been Vergil summoned in the middle of the night to go to Dante, or better, Raphael, awakened by a blast of God's light to fly to the side of Tobias. (250)

O'Connor is certainly having fun here. The passage builds and builds in its idiocy--imagine comparing Mr. Head, a backwoods country bumpkin, to Vergil. Yet this is how he sees himself, and if Mr. Head had any inkling of who Vergil might be, he certainly would have made the comparison himself.

O'Connor uses this gross exaggeration to introduce Mr. Head to us before the action even begins. She writes about Mr. Head the same way she writes about the grandmother in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," and the same way she will write about Joy-Hulga and Mrs. Freeman in "Good Country People." These characters all see themselves unrealistically. And by now the reader is beginning to understand that any such character will not escape unchanged in the end.

In terms of grotesquerie of character, we see at once similarities between Mr. Head and the grandmother. Mr. Head is not a good grandfather to his grandson, Nelson. He fulfills all the rudiments of upbringing--he provides food and shelter and clothing; but he neglects to understand or even try to understand his grandson. Mr. Head is too immature, too limited (as is

the grandmother) to attend to anyone else's emotional needs. We cringe with sympathy for Nelson all the way to Atlanta as Mr. Head announces to everyone that this is Nelson's first trip to the city, his "'first nigger,'" and that he is "'ignorant as the day he was born'" (252).

The grotesquerie here is more prevalent in character development than in the action of the story. All the mishaps of the day are the fault of Mr. Head and cannot be attributed to fate. The mishaps begin early as Mr. Head, determined to take Nelson back to Atlanta (where he was born) and teach him of all the evils of big city life, oversleeps and wakes to find his grandson already up and cooking breakfast. The two bicker constantly because despite their vast age difference, they are both emotionally about ten years old. Mr. Head, thrown off schedule and challenged by Nelson's organization, tries to regain control of the situation by saying, "'It's no hurry, you'll get there soon enough and it's no guarantee you'll like it when you do neither'" (251). The humor and grotesquerie of the story are meshed in Mr. Head's character. Every time he opens his mouth he utters complete ignorance, but he sees himself as a guide--a prophet. He cannot stand for Nelson to have the upper hand, and he is so insecure that he engages in constant "one-upmanship" with his ten-year-old grandson. In the following dialogue we learn more about Mr. Head's character and more about one

of the major ideas behind the story--Nelson's "first nigger":

> "You may not like it a bit," Mr. Head continued. "It'll be full of niggers." The boy made a face as if he could handle a nigger.
>
> "All right," Mr. Head said. "You ain't ever even seen a nigger."
>
> "You wasn't up very early," Nelson said.
>
> "You ain't ever seen a nigger," Mr. Head repeated. "There hasn't been a nigger in this county since we run that one out twelve years ago and that was before you were born." He looked at the boy as if he were daring him to say he had ever seen a Negro.
>
> "How do you know I never saw a nigger when I lived there before?" Nelson asked. "I probably saw a lot of niggers."
>
> "If you seen one you didn't know what he was," Mr. Head said, completely exasperated. "A six-month-old child don't know a nigger from anybody else."
>
> "I reckon I'll know a nigger if I see one," the boy said and got up and straightened his slick sharply creased gray hat and went outside to the privy. (252)

The comic implications of this dialogue are obvious. Imagine someone who lives in such rural isolation that

his grandchild has never seen a black person having the audacity to tell that child that the reason he won't like the city is because "it's full of niggers." Instead of explaining the differences between blacks and whites to Nelson, he so fills him with vague descriptions and prejudices that when Nelson finally does meet up with a Negro, he doesn't even recognize him as one.

O'Connor has captured the essence of the "poor white trash" character beautifully in Mr. Head. It is this sort of humor--this laughing at Mr. Head's ignorance--that this story is filled with. More humor, mostly at Nelson's expense, occurs as they board the train, for Mr. Head wants everyone to know that he has been on a train before, he has been to the city before, and he is only going back now as a guide for his ignorant grandson:

> Mr. Head saw two unoccupied seats and pushed Nelson toward them. "Get in there by the winder," he said in his normal voice which was very loud at this hour of the morning. "Nobody cares if you sit right there because it's nobody in it. Sit right there."
>
> "I heard you," the boy muttered, It's no use in you yelling." (253)

The climax of the train ride comes when a light-skinned black man walks down the aisle past Mr. Head and Nelson. Mr. Head grabs Nelson's arm and stares at the

man with grave intensity. The black man is obviously far more sophisitcated than the backward white grandfather and grandson, but Mr. Head only sees color, and the beauty of Nelson's innocence is tainted as Mr. Head ridicules him for not recognizing the man as a "nigger:"

> "I'd of thought you'd know a nigger since you seen so many when you was in the city on your first visit," Mr. Head continued. "That's his first nigger," he said to the man across the aisle.
>
> The boy slid down in his seat. "You said they were black," he said in an angry voice. "You never said they were tan. How do you expect me to know anything when you don't tell me right?" (255)

O'Connor gives wonderful insight here into how prejudice grows. She says of Nelson, "He felt that the Negro had deliberately walked down the aisle to make a fool of him and he hated him with a fierce raw fresh hate; and also, he understood now why his grandfather disliked them" (256). O'Connor has a ten-year-old's psychological make-up pegged perfectly. His grandfather has humiliated him, but Nelson transfers his disgust for Mr. Head to a disgust for the black man--for all blacks. After all, it is easier to hate a stranger than it is to hate a family member. As independent as Nelson would like to be, and as angry as he gets at his

grandfather, he realizes that Mr. Head is all he has. This dependence is touched on twice in the early part of this story.

The first scene which shows Nelson's dependence on his grandfather occurs as Mr. Head is showing Nelson various compartments of the train. They wander into the kitchen, and a black waiter exclaims to them, "'Passengers are NOT allowed in the kitchen!'" Mr. Head shouts, "'And there's good reason for that, because the cockroaches would run them out!'" (257) When some of the other passengers laugh, Nelson remembers that Mr. Head is considered a quick wit at home; he feels immediate pride for and dependence on the old man. The second incident occurs when the train makes its first stop:

> Nelson lunged out of his sitting position, trembling. Mr. Head pushed him down by the shoulder.
>
> "Keep your seat," he said in dignified tones. "The first stop is on the edge of town. The second stop is at the main railroad station." He had come to this knowledge on his first trip when he had got off at the first stop and had had to pay a man fifteen cents to take him into the heart of town. Nelson sat back down, very pale. For the first time in his life, he understood that his grandfather was indispensable to him. (257)

So Mr. Head sets Nelson up to fail. He is so limited himself that he feels the need to compete with his grandson. Instead of caring for Nelson and trying to protect him from the hardness of life, he prefers to embarrass him, to laugh at his ignorance, and see to it that he learns everything from painful mistakes.

When the two finally reach Atlanta, Nelson is awe-struck. One of the first things they do is weigh themselves on a one-penny weighing machine. The scene is a good example of O'Connor's subtle humor mixed with foreshadowing:

> Mr. Head's ticket said, "You weigh 120 pounds. You are upright and brave and all your friends admire you." He put the ticket in his pocket surprised that the machine should have got his character correct but his weight wrong, for he had weighed on the grain scale not long before and knew he weighed 110. Nelson's ticket said, "You weigh 98 pounds. You have a great destiny ahead of you but beware of dark women." Nelson did not know any women and weighed only 68 pounds but Mr. Head pointed out that the machine had probably printed the number upside down, meaning the 9 for a 6. (259)

After Nelson has discovered the excitement of a big city he exclaims, "I was born here! This is where I

come from!" (259) Mr. Head realizes that something must be done immediately to divert Nelson's excitement, so he makes up tales about the city sewage system. He makes Nelson bend down and put his head in the opening of a sewer, telling him that men are sucked into the sewer periodically and never heard from again. But Nelson is too quick for his grandfather, merely stating that the way to avoid such a fate is to avoid the sewer.

As the day progresses the two wander around the streets of Atlanta, until finally, late in the afternoon, they realize they are lost in the black section of town. It is here that they discover they left their bag lunches on the train and therefore have nothing to eat. The early morning excitement has worn off, they are exhausted from walking all day, and Nelson is furious with Mr. Head for losing their food. They begin to feel nervous--being the only whites in an all black neighborhood.

This section of the story is important, not only in terms of plot development, but also because it gives some insight into Flannery O'Connor's understanding of the plight of the black in America. This story was written before the Civil Rights Movement by a woman born deep in the heart of the South. Yet everything about this story points to O'Connor's apparent understanding and empathy for the black Southerner.

Some critics disagree; however, and in response to John J. Clark's assumption that "her fiction does not reflect the social issues, particularly the racial problems, which beset the South during her lifetime," (Hyman 41) Stanley Edgar Hyman states:

> I think that it does, and more powerfully and truly than that of anyone else, but the expression is always implicit, covert, cryptic. As her mad prophets are metaphoric for Roman Catholic truth, so in a sense all the fierce violence in her work is metaphoric for violence done the Negro . . . The Negroes in the stories are seen externally, as a conventional white southern lady would see them, with no access to their concealed sensibility, but occassionally one of them will say something (there are several such remarks in "The Displaced Person") that shows how much the author knows about that sensibility. Negroes in the fiction sometimes carry profound spiritual meaning, as in "The Artificial Nigger" . . . . (41)

We sense O'Connor's empathy and grasp of this sensibility early in the story when the dignified black man who walks down the aisle of the train is later seen in the dining car, sitting in the section designated for Negroes only. Mr. Head, of course feeling quite superior and once

again acting as a guide to Nelson says, "'Look, they rope them off'" (256). We sense O'Connor's understanding again in her description of the city street where Mr. Head and Nelson get lost: "There were colored men in their undershirts standing in the doors and colored women rocking on the sagging porches. Colored children played in the gutters and stopped what they were doing to look at them" (260). O'Connor describes so acutely the poverty of the black section of town that the tense, nervous comment Mr. Head makes is a sort of emotional outlet for him: "Black eyes in black faces were watching them from every direction. 'Yes,' Mr. Head said, 'this is where you were born--right here with all these niggers'" (260). What ironic justice for these two to be lost in black Atlanta.

Although this is a frightening experience for these two characters, it is not powerful enough in itself to act as a catalyst for the change of Nelson and Mr. Head. Nelson's change does begin, however, a moment later when he is mesmerized by the presence of a sensual black woman. Here again, by the power of this scene, O'Connor's respect for the black race is evident:

> Up ahead he saw a large colored woman leaning in a doorway that opened onto the sidewalk. Her hair stood straight out from her head for

about four inches all around and she was resting on bare brown feet that turned pink at the sides. She had on a pink dress that showed her exact shape. As they came abreast of her, she lazily lifted one hand to her head and her fingers disappeared into her hair. Nelson stopped. He felt his breath drawn up by the woman's dark eyes.

"How do you get back to town?" he said in a voice that did not sound like his own.

After a minute she said, "You in town now," in a rich low tone that made Nelson feel as if cool spray had been turned on him . . . .

He stood drinking every detail of her. His eyes traveled up from her great knees to her forehead and then made a triangular path from the glistening sweat on her neck down and across her tremendous bosom and over her bare arm back to where her fingers lay hidden in her hair. He suddenly wanted her to reach down and pick him up and draw him against her and then he wanted to feel her breath on his face. He wanted to look down and down into her eyes while she held him tighter and tighter. He had never had such a feeling before. He felt as if he were reeling down through a pitch-black tunnel. (262)

In this wonderfully descriptive passage the reader is mesmerized with Nelson. How ironic it is that a kind of sexual awakening for the boy comes at the hands of a "black" woman. But mostly it is touchingly real--Nelson's longing for a mother figure emerges.

Of course Mr. Head must intervene and ruin this experience for Nelson by calling him ignorant, "'Standing there grinning like a chim-pan-zee while a nigger woman gives you a direction. Great Gawd!'" (263). Mr. Head is too old and his prejudice is too great for him to understand Nelson's experience, so he drags him on in the wrong direction both physically and spiritually.

Finally we reach the peak of this story, and what may have been the reader's distaste for Mr. Head, is likely to change to disbelief, as he goes too far in his abuse of Nelson. Until this point the grotesquerie of the story has been limited to Mr. Head's ignorance and prejudice. Here, his action is grotesque. Nelson falls asleep on a bench while Mr. Head purposefully wanders from him and makes a loud noise to wake him--knowing full well that Nelson will panic when he wakes and can't find him. He wants to teach the boy one more lesson about big city life, but his plan backfires. Nelson wakes in a panic and runs wildly down the city street searching for Mr. Head. He accidentally knocks down a woman who threatens to call the police. When

Mr. Head finally catches up with Nelson, the boy grabs him and clings onto him for support. He reaches out to the one person he has in his life, and Mr. Head says, "'This is not my boy, I never seen him before'" (265). It is a scene the reader will probably never forget.

This shocking scene in "The Artificial Nigger" is the scene from which O'Connor draws the epiphany for Mr. Head. And though not as drastically as with the Misfit scene in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," the story changes direction from this point on. The next few pages become a desperate attempt for Mr. Head to gain Nelson's forgiveness. The boy ignores him completely, and Mr. Head becomes consumed with guilt. With all his defenses down Mr. Head yells to a stranger,"'I'm lost! I'm lost and can't find my way and me and this boy have to catch this train and I can't find the station. Oh Gawd I'm lost! Oh hep me Gawd I'm lost!'" (267). This scene is rather embarrassing to read, but therein lies its strength. In essence, Mr. Head stands naked before his grandson--for the first time stripped of his false pretenses, helpless, childlike, and, to borrow his own phrase, "ignorant as the day he was born." It is a powerful scene, but it is not quite intense enough to shake Nelson into forgiving his grandfather. Even though Mr. Head gets directions from the stranger, and he and Nelson finally escape the black section and near the white suburbs, the boy remains unforgiving:

> The child was standing about ten feet away, his face bloodless under the gray hat. His eyes were triumphantly cold. There was no light in them, no feeling, no interest. He was merely there, a small figure, waiting. Home was nothing to him. Mr. Head turned slowly. He felt he knew now what time would be like without seasons and what heat would be like without light and what man would be like without salvation. He didn't care if he never made the train and if it had not been for what suddenly caught his attention, like a cry out of the gathering dust, he might have forgotten there was a station to go to. (268)

What catches Mr. Head's attention becomes the unifying force of the story--it reaches out and touches him and the boy with such force that they are re-united. What they see in the white suburbs is a lawn statue of a black man eating watermelon--something the likes of which they have obviously never seen before. They both exclaim, "An artificial nigger!" (268)--a humorous deduction befitting these two characters.

O'Connor discusses this term, "artificial nigger," in 1966, in "An Interview with Flannery O'Connor and Robert Penn Warren," published in Writer to Writer:

> Well, I never had heard the phrase before, but my mother was out trying to buy a cow, and she rode up the country a-piece. She had the address of a man who was supposed to have a cow for sale, but she couldn't find it, so she stopped in a small town and asked the country man on the side of the road where this house was, and he said, "Well, you go into this town and you can't miss it 'cause it's the only house in town with a artificial nigger in frcnt of it." So I decided to find a story to fit that. A little lower than starting with the theme. (73)

O'Connor's focus on the type of person who would use such a term is accurate as always. Certainly the country man who gave her mother directions was a Mr. Head himself.

In the passage following their discovery of the statue, comic irony abounds, and the grotesque ignorance of Mr. Head and Nelson is seen immediately. Appropriate to their base level of thinking, the only thing the grandfather and grandson see is an "artificial nigger":

> They stood gazing at the artificial Negro as if they were faced with some great mystery, some monument to another's victory that

> brought them together in their common defeat. They could both feel it dissolving their differences like an action of mercy. Mr. Head had never known before what mercy felt like because he had been too good to deserve any, but he felt he knew now. He looked at Nelson and understood that he must say something to the child to show that he was still wise and in the look the boy returned he saw a hungry need for that assurance. Nelson's eyes seemed to implore him to explain once and for all the mystery of existence.
>
> Mr. Head opened his lips to make a lofty statement and heard himself say, "They ain't got enough real ones here. They got to have an artificial one."
>
> After a second, the boy nodded with a strange shivering about his mouth and said, "Let's go home before we get ourselves lost again." (269)

This passage must be viewed comically. O'Connor's exalted language throughout the entire story evokes humor. The imagined scene of these two staring dumfoundedly at the broken-down statue of a black man eating watermelon and feeling that they are faced with some "great mystery" is funny. As usual, Mr. Head and Nelson have missed the point. They do not understand

the symbolic implications of this statue, and their ignorance is humorous.

It is with humor that the conclusion of "The Artificial Nigger" should be viewed. The final two paragraphs of the story have been overly scrutinized and criticized, and although O'Connor could have ended her story with Nelson's statement, "Let's go home before we get ourselves lost again," she chooses to add further explanation of Mr. Head's transformation as she has done throughout the story:

> Mr. Head stood very still and felt the action of mercy touch him again but this time he knew there were no words in the world that could name it . . . . He had never thought himself a great sinner before but he saw now that his true depravity had been hidden from him lest it cause him despair. He realized that he was forgiven for sins from the beginning of time . . . until the present when he had denied poor Nelson. He saw that no sin was too monstrous for him to claim as his own, and since God loved in proportion as He forgave, he felt ready at that instant to enter Paradise.
>
> Nelson, composing his expression under the shadow of his hat brim, watched him with a

> mixture of fatigue and suspicion . . . and he muttered, "I'm glad I went once, but I'll never go back again!" (269-270)

Many critics read a great deal into the first paragraph of this passage, but neglect Nelson's final statement. Though this insightful explanation at the conclusion is not typical of O'Connor's technical writing style, it is thematically typical.

In most other stories the epiphany of her characters is described through dialogue. Here, Mr. Head's "epiphany" is described through narration and that is the only real difference between this conclusion and others. The criticism of many that this ending is inappropriate seems insensitive to the style O'Connor has chosen for this particular story. According to Louis D. Rubin,

> . . . The fact is that the passage is not only appropriate but necessary, for not merely the final episode but the entire story has been told that way, from outside and above, by a narrator whose descriptive commentary not only goes far beyond Mr. Head's verbal and conceptual limitations but works with and against the actual mundane situation throughout, for purposes of comedy and pathos. What we have to realize in a story like this is that there is a deliberate and carefully

> constructed distance between narrator and character, which is embodied in the language but goes beyond that into viewpoint and attitude. (67)

Critics who insist on taking O'Connor's ending so literally and seriously are proved wrong with Nelson's final statement, "'I'm glad I went once, but I'll never go back again!'" Mr. Head thinks he has just had a truly mystifying experience, and with one statement--typically characteristic of Nelson in its banality--Mr. Head is brought back into the real world. O'Connor exposes the comedy of the entire scene with the inflated language of the final paragraphs and with this one line. This final scene does much to reunite O'Connor's literary elements. After the grotesquerie of Mr. Head's denial and the experience with the lawn statue, then Mr. Head's guilt-induced catharsis, the overriding tone becomes one of humor.

We can view "The Artificial Nigger" as sort of a stepping stone to a story perfected. Like "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," it contains O'Connor's major elements, techniques and themes: grotesquerie (this time predominantly in action) used to bring about character change or epiphany, and finally humor, to offset the grotesque and add authenticity to the story. Also similar to "A Good Man Is hard to Find," "The Artificial Nigger" leaves some unanswered questions because of the

concluding paragraphs. In the final story to be fully discussed, "Good Country People," written in June of 1955, O'Connor reaches a peak as she creates perhaps her finest short story. Filled with wonderful characterization and humor, this work leaves no unanswered questions.

Chapter III

In a letter to a close friend published in The Habit of Being, Flannery O'Connor says of "Good Country People," "I wrote 'Good Country People' in about four days, the shortest I've ever written anything in, just sat down and wrote it" (160). In another letter she further discusses writing technique and the importance of not becoming preoccupied with it: "There was less conscious technical control in 'Good Country People' than in any story I've ever written. Technique works best when it is unconscious, and it is unconscious here" (171). Perhaps it is this more relaxed approach to technique, this free-flowing, uncontrived story-telling that makes "Good Country People" successful. At any rate, it is a wonderful story--technically excellent in a natural way.

Another clue to why "Good Country People" works is the fact that the characters in the story seem very close to O'Connor. With the most basic biographical facts in mind, the reader may speculate that O'Connor wrote with some autobiographical intent when she created Joy-Hulga, whose physical handicap forces her to live at home on a farm with her mother. O'Connor's

close identification with the characters and the setting of this story make it even more unified and readable than "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" and "The Artificial Nigger."

O'Connor's major literary elements are at work again in "Good Country People." Here the outcome is less brutal than the conclusion of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," but it is definitely grotesque. In succinct harmony with the theme, each character here possesses some overpoweringly unbecoming idiosyncrasy. This is another story full of misfits, though not violent ones. Whereas "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" changes direction midstream from a humorous look at a country family before the accident, to a horrifying tale of massacre afterward, the storyline of "Good Country People" is more consistent--it reads more coherently. This work is richly flavored with humor; the ending is more funny than tragic.

In the title of the story, as in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," there is a play on the word "good," for while these characters are definitely country people, they are not necessarily "good" country people. Each, with the possible exception of Mrs. Hopewell, is finally seen as being more bad than good. The first misfit we meet up with is Mrs. Freeman, a hired hand who spends most of her time gossiping and discussing every possible bodily function and home remedy imaginable. Apparently

O'Connor had great fun creating this character: she makes her as grotesque as possible. We get some insight into the creation of such a character in the following excerpt from a letter published in The Habit of Being: "I don't know how long they [a farm family] will be with us but I am enjoying it while it lasts, and I aim to give my 'gret' reading audience a shot of some of the details sometime" (30). We get more than just a "shot" of details in this story, for Mrs. Freeman is ignorant, stubborn, conniving, and very real. O'Connor introduces her in the opening lines as if she were a Mack truck:

> Besides the neutral expression that she wore when she was alone, Mrs. Freeman had two others, forward and reverse, that she used for all her human dealings . . . . Mrs. Freeman could never be brought to admit herself wrong on any point. She would stand there and if she could be brought to say anything, it was something like, "Well, I wouldn't of said it was and I wouldn't of said it wasn't." (271)

A page or two later we find that "Mrs. Freeman had a special fondness for the details of secret infections, hidden deformities, assualts upon children. Of diseases, she preferred the lingering or incurable" (275).

With these characteristics in mind, Mrs. Freeman's fascination with Mrs. Hopewell (the owner of the farm) and her daughter is understandable. Joy, the thirty-one-year-old daughter of Mrs. Hopewell, has an artificial leg. She is a pitiful, self-pitying, manipulative character bent on her own destruction. A nihilist, whose only concerns are totally selfish, she constantly calls attention to her physical imperfection and is obstinately opposed to improving herself in any way. She has gone so far as to change her name to the ugliest name she can imagine--Hulga. Aside from Joy-Hulga's many negative qualities, she is intelligent. But even this attribute is twisted as she sees herself in a far greater light than is realistic. Joy-Hulga sees herself as a genius surrounded by ignorant peons. Just as in earlier stories where both the grandmother's and Mr. Head's tunnel vision had to be dealt with, so does Joy-Hulga's. O'Connor wants to save her characters (and of course her readers) from themselves, and her ironic conclusion to this story serves as a sardonic lesson to Joy-Hulga and to all of us.

Each morning Joy-Hulga wakes to the gibberish of Mrs. Freeman and Mrs. Hopewell. By the time she enters the kitchen,

> they had usually finished the weather report and were on one or the other of Mrs. Freeman's daughters, Glynese or Carramae, Joy called

> them Glycerin and Caramel. Glynese, a redhead, was eighteen and had many admirers; Carramae, a blond, was only fifteen but already married and pregnant. She could not keep anything on her stomach. Each morning Mrs. Freeman told Mrs. Hopewell how many times she had vomited since the last report. (272)

This passage is an excellent example of O'Connor's humor, grotesquerie and realism at work together. Certainly we have all met a Mrs. Freeman at one time or another--someone who, with a sparkle in her eye, loves nothing better than to tell all the explicit details of her hysterectomy. O'Connor possesses this great gift of characterization--we know her characters.

In the story Joy-Hulga appears to detest Mrs. Freeman, but these two are actually somewhat alike. They have a sort of mutual understanding. Each is fascinated with her own type of grotesquerie--Mrs. Freeman with her gore; Joy with being as negative as possible and in the choosing of her name, Hulga:

> She considered the name her personal affair. She had arrived at it first purely on the basis of its ugly sound and then the full genius of its fitness had struck her. She had a vision of the name working like the ugly sweating Vulcan who stayed in the

> furnace and to whom, presumably, the goddess had to come when called. She saw it as the name of her highest creative act. One of her major triumphs was that her mother had not been able to turn her dust into Joy, but the greater one was that she had been able to turn it herself into Hulga. (275)

Here Joy-Hulga seems void of any real feeling--any understanding--in her sarcastic jabs at Glynese and Carramae, she is even jealous of them. They, as backward and pitiful as they must be, at least have "many admirers." They at least know how to feel; Joy-Hulga knows only how to think. O'Connor's irony flashes when Joy-Hulga screams at her mother, "'Woman! do you ever look inside? Do you ever look inside and see what you are not?'" (276) For it is Joy-Hulga who must learn to look inside and see what she is not. To her mother's dismay Joy-Hulga has a Ph.D. in philosophy; here O'Connor describes the daughter through her mother's eyes:

> The doctors had told Mrs. Hopewell that with the best of care, Joy might see forty-five. She had a weak heart. Joy had made it plain that if it had not been for this condition, she would be far from these red hills and good country people. She would be in a university lecturing to people who knew what she was talking about. And Mrs. Hopewell

> could very well picture her there, looking like a scarecrow and lecturing to more of the same. Here she went about all day in a six-year-old skirt and a yellow sweat shirt with a faded cowboy on a horse embossed on it . . . . All day Joy sat on her neck in a deep chair, reading. Sometimes she went for walks but she didn't like dogs or cats or flowers or nature or nice young men. She looked at nice young men as if she could smell their stupidity. (276)

Joy-Hulga is obviously a miserable woman in need of epiphany.

The plot of "Good Country People" further develops when, out of pity, Mrs. Hopewell invites an "innocent" country Bible salesman in for dinner. O'Connor's grotesque description of him and his background is typically funny/horrible: "He said he was the seventh child of twelve and that his father had been crushed very badly in fact, almost cut in two and was practically not recognizable" (280). Joy-Hulga is at first disgusted by Manley Pointer but slowly becomes interested in him, thinking that she feels sorry for him. She rationalizes that she can teach him about life and practice her philosophical principles on him. So for purely philanthropic reasons, she accepts a date with him to go on a picnic the following day.

Even Joy-Hulga cannot escape the sexual attraction she feels for Manley since he is the first man to give her any attention. But she hides and distorts the feelings which seem alien to her. She cannot bring herself to let go and feel these emotions that are so important to psychological well-being. She cannot let her guard down to experience real living the way Mrs. Freeman's daughters do, for even a moment, and what begins as a sexual fantasy ends in a philosophical quest to give Manley a deeper understanding of life:

> During the night she had imagined that she seduced him. She imagined that the two of them walked on the place until they came to the storage barn beyond the two back fields and there, she imagined, that things came to such a pass that she very easily seduced him and that then, of course, she had to reckon with his remorse. True genius can get an idea across even to an inferior mind. She imagined that she took his remorse in hand and changed it into a deeper understanding of life. She took all his shame away and turned it into something useful. (284)

Joy-Hulga is so emotionally stunted she cannot have a simple sexual fantasy without giving it a purpose. She even kisses methodically. We see clearly the way her mind works when the next day she receives her first

kiss from Manley:

> The kiss, which had more pressure than feeling behind it, produced that extra surge of adrenalin in the girl that enables one to carry a packed trunk out of a burning house, but in her, the power went at once to the brain . . . . She had never been kissed before and she was pleased to discover that it was an unexceptional experience and all a matter of the mind's control. Some people might enjoy drain water if they were told it was vodka. (285)

Her defenses are so firmly intact that she cannot simply enjoy the kiss. The two continue their walk to the barn where Pointer asks her if she has been "'saved.'" She replies, "'In my economy I am saved and you are damned but I told you I didn't believe in God'" (286).

After a few more kisses in the hayloft Manley takes Joy-Hulga's eye glasses, stashes them in his pocket, and demands she profess her love for him. The following scene is a great lead into O'Connor's outrageous conclusion:

> "You got to say it," he repeated. "You got to say you love me." She was always careful how she committed herself.
>
> "In a sense," she began, "if you use the

> word loosely, you might say that. But it's not a word I use. I don't have illusions. I'm one of those people who see through to nothing."
>
> The boy was frowning. "You got to say it. I said it and you got to say it," he said.
>
> The girl looked at him almost tenderly. "You poor baby," she murmured. "It's just as well you don't understand," and she pulled him by the neck, face-down against her. "We are all damned," she said, "but some of us have taken off our blindfolds and see that there is nothing to see. It's a kind of salvation." (288)

The fact that Joy-Hulga says she has no illusions is of course comically ironic--her entire life is an illusion. Naturally "love" is not a word she uses because it is not an emotion she feels.

Joy-Hulga is smug about her ideology and her intellectual prowess over Manley, but her emotional vulnerability is soon exposed when Manley asks her to prove her love for him. She, ready to indulge him and get along with his "training," says,"'how?'" He whispers in reply, "'Show me where your wooden leg joins on'" (288). The scene is hilarious. Joy-Hulga is horrified by the vulgarity of his request, but Manley is extremely crafty, and he "seduces" her by telling her

the wooden leg is what makes her special--different from anyone else: "She decided that for the first time in her life she was face to face with real innocence. This boy, with an instinct that came beyond wisdom, had touched the truth about her" (289). At this point Joy-Hulga has lost control. She thinks for the first time in her life she is understood by another human being. The core of her whole personality--all her insecurities, fears, and defenses--is wrapped up in that leg, and Pointer, with this one statement, has turned these negative qualities--these weaknesses--into strengths. He has made the leg into an asset, something unique and good about her, and for a moment Joy-Hulga is transformed.

Then the folly begins, for Manley Pointer is not sincere. We soon learn that he has a fetish for artificial anatomical parts, and he wants her wooden leg. In a moment of weakness, Joy-Hulga gives the leg to him. At this instant, Pointer opens one of his Bibles and, to the girl's astonishment,she sees that it is filled with pornographic playing cards and a package of condoms. All of O'Connor's strongest literary elements are meshed here--humor, irony, grotesquerie, a play on religion--and the scene is superb.

Joy-Hulga is devastated and murmurs, "'Aren't you just good country people?'" exposing her true innocence and vulnerability. He answers, "'Yeah, but it ain't

held me back none. I'm as good as you any day of the week'" (290-291). When she calls him a hypocrite he packs up his Bible, her glasses, and her wooden leg and leaves her in the hayloft with the comment, "'I've gotten a lot of interesting things. One time I got a woman's glass eye this way'" (291). And his crowning blow to Joy-Hulga is the following: "'I'll tell you another thing Hulga, you ain't so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born'" (291). And Manley is right; Joy-Hulga is not so smart. She has been, up to this point, leading a deluded existence. O'Connor's characters do not usually get away with living this way for long.

To lighten the grotesquerie of this hayloft fiasco, we are given one final funny scene with Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman working in the garden, ignorant of what has just taken place, discussing how simple the Bible salesman is:

> "Why, that looks like that nice dull young man that tried to sell me a bible yesterday," Mrs. Hopewell said, squinting. "He must have been selling them to the Negroes back in there. He was so simple," she said, "but I guess the world would be better off if we were all that simple."
>
> Mrs. Freeman's gaze drove forward and just touched him before he disappeared under the hill.

> Then she returned her attention to the evil-smelling onion shoot she was lifting from the ground. "Some can't be that simple," she said. "I know I never could." (291)

O'Connor's conclusion is successful here because she (as the author) never intervenes to explain or comment. The story ends where it should. Joy-Hulga is left in the hayloft (where she belongs) to try to figure out what has just happened to her, and we are left laughing.

Flannery O'Connor said of her stories, "The truth is I like them better than anybody and I read them over and over and laugh and laugh, then get embarrassed when I remember I was the one wrote them" (Habit of Being 80). Though "Good Country People" continually amuses the reader, its message is not overshadowed by the humor. For Joy-Hulga both loses and gains in this work. Superficially, she loses her eye glasses and literally cannot see clearly, and she loses her leg, thus temporarily losing her identity. As in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," O'Connor uses this catharsis of character as a positive event. Joy-Hulga, even more than the grandmother, needs desperately to change. She needs to be saved from herself, and, thanks to Manley Pointer and this seemingly negative experience, we feel that she will be--that she will "see more clearly" now. At the very least, she will re-evaluate her own thinking; perhaps she will lose her air of

superiority and learn not to judge others at face value. If O'Connor plays God sometimes, as she does with the character of Joy-Hulga, it is with good reason. She forces her characters (and readers) to see themselves realistically. According to Dorothy Tuck McFarland,

> Hulga has rejected the physical world and the life of the body in preference for the life of the mind . . . . Her rejection of the physical world stems from her awareness of its liability to imperfection. Hulga's own imperfection is gross--she lost a leg when she was ten--but O'Connor obviously intended her to be a figure of all mankind, which suffers from the imperfections of the human condition. (36)

We are somewhat sympathetic to Joy-Hulga's plight; after all, she is surrounded by morons, and she is physically crippled. She is trapped on this farm with nothing much to do, smothered by her ridiculously optimistic mother, Mrs. Hopewell (appropriately named), who "had no bad qualities of her own but was able to use other people's in such a way that she never felt the lack" (272). The reader senses immediately that Joy-Hulga is salvageable, but that she is in great need of a catalyst to bring about her catharsis. Since this catalyst does appear in the end, we sense O'Connor's

allegience to Joy-Hulga. Here the obvious similarities between O'Connor and Joy-Hulga should be mentioned.

Flannery O'Connor herself was "trapped" (by her illness) on her Andalusia farm with her mother and on many days probably felt quite a bit like Joy-Hulga. In the following passage she speaks of herself in a letter to her anonymous friend "A," and it becomes obvious that much of Joy-Hulga's personality was her own:

> The only embossed [sweat shirt] I had had a fierce looking bulldog on it with the word Georgia over him. I wore it all the time, it being my policy at that point in life to create an unfavorable impression. My urge for such has to be repressed as my mother does not approve of making a spectacle of oneself when over thirty. (Fitzgerald 94)

In another excerpt from a letter in <u>The Habit of Being</u>, O'Connor says to "A," " . . . You are also right about this negativity being in large degree personal. My disposition is a combination of Nelson's and Hulga's. Or perhaps I only flatter myself" (101). She does not flatter herself, but she should. Perhaps Flannery O'Connor possessed the clarity of vision to see and realistically portray humans as they truly are. But she does not possess this negativity of character to be a "Nelson" or a "Hulga." She is too positive in her spirit, and her sense of humor is too acute.

After studying "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," "The Artificial Nigger," and "Good Country People," we can see a pattern developing. O'Connor "saves" only those characters she deems worthy of saving--those who could most benefit from a transformation, and those who could show the rest of the "rough beasts slouching toward Bethlehem" the way to go. So in the end of this story we have Pointer and Joy-Hulga who are both in need of help. But Manley Pointer, like The Misfit, has chosen his path. He believes in nothing, has found pleasure in "meanness," and plans to stick with his life of deceit. Perhaps to keep the humor of the story intact, O'Connor does not try to touch Pointer. So it is Joy-Hulga alone who is salvaged, possibly because Flannery O'Connor sees so much of herself in this character, and probably because Joy-Hulga's lopsided "self" (like her body without the wooden leg) is in such need of transformation--one that will bring about positive change in her life and a positive ending to the story.

At the end of "Good Country People," O'Connor leaves the conclusion up to the reader--perhaps because she was so close to Joy-Hulga. The work is technically consistent, making it enjoyable to read again and again as O'Connor must have done herself. Everything fits perfectly in this story. The grotesquerie is present, but not overpowering. It does not turn violent, as in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," or ugly, as in "The

Artificial Nigger." Religion is present too, but only as a character enhancer for Pointer and Joy-Hulga, not as a message which comes too obviously through epiphany. Both grotesquerie and religion are used here as techniques to keep the story consistently humorous; and its humor is what is most memorable about "Good Country People."

Conclusion

Throughout the volume _A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories_, Flannery O'Connor's literary elements--her technique of grotesquerie, humorous tone, and religious themes--frequently occur. The ten stories that make up the collection are all good; "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," "The Artificial Nigger," and "Good Country People" are especially effective. Of the remaining seven stories in the volume, three others stand out: "The River," "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," and "The Displaced Person."

Obvious comparisons can be made between "The River," written in the summer of 1953, and "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." As with the conclusion of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," the ending of "The River" is horribly unforgettable. Yet the build-up to this grotesque conclusion is both unusual and humorous. In this story O'Connor has the nihilistic, socialite parents of a small boy pitted against a backwoods fundamentalist babysitter. It is an interesting idea with great opportunities for humor, but O'Connor's thematic implications are too contrived. She makes Harry's parents too brazen in their nihilistic apathy. They make fun

of Mrs. Connin, the babysitter, to her face; they have parties every night; the mother has a hangover every day; and the child is so neglected by them that he wanders away from home at age four and drowns.

However, the humor of the story cannot be forgotten. As we read the following passage about Harry's first encounter with Jesus Christ, although it is a more humorous treatment of religion, we are reminded of The Misfit's twisted understanding of Jesus Christ and religion in general:

> It occurred to him that he was lucky this time that they had found Mrs. Connin who would take you away for the day instead of an ordinary sitter who only sat where you lived or went to the park. You found out more when you left where you lived. He had found out already this morning that he had been made by a carpenter named Jesus Christ. Before he had thought it had been a doctor named Sladewell, a fat man with a yellow mustache who gave him shots and thought his name was Herbert, but this must have been a joke. They joked a lot where he lived. If he had thought about it before he would have thought Jesus Christ was a word like "Oh" or "damn" or "God," or maybe somebody who had cheated them out of something sometime. (163)

So Harry "gets" religion in this story; and Mrs. Connin, who is like the grandmother of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," in her near-sighted conservativeness, sees to it that he is baptized in the river--an act he understands even less than the story of the carpenter who made him:

> The little boy was too shocked to cry. He spit out the muddy water and rubbed his wet sleeve into his eyes and over his face.
>
> "Don't forget his mamma," Mrs. Connin called. "He wants you to pray for his mamma. She's sick."
>
> "Lord," the preacher said, "we pray for somebody in affliction who isn't here to testify. Is your mother sick in the hospital?" he asked. "Is she in pain?"
>
> The child stared at him. "She hasn't got up yet," he said in a high dazed voice. "She has a hangover." (168)

We see all of O'Connor's literary elements in "The River," but the ending here, as in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," is almost too devastating. Perhaps what makes this ending worse is that we have no real clue as to what is about to take place. The ending itself is no worse than the massacre scene in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," but at least there we had some foreshadowing. The day following his baptism, Harry leaves home, mysteriously attracted to the river, finally reaches the

shore, and, in a trance-like state, goes in over his head and drowns. We are left questioning whether it is believable that a four-year-old boy would be able to board public transportation alone, ride to the country, seek out the sight of his baptism and drown. While we understand that O'Connor wishes Harry's death to act as a lesson for his lazy parents, the ending is not nearly as effective as the conclusion of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." So, while there are similarities in the humor, the grotesquerie, and the characterization of these two stories, "The River" is not as believable and, therefore, not as consistently good as O'Connor's more famous story.

Another successful story in the collection, "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," was written in the spring of 1953 and later made into a movie for television. In it we find several similarities in character development and action to "The Artificial Nigger." Yet "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" is not as strong a story because of its weak ending.

In the story we find literal grotesquerie in the physical deformity of Mr. Shiflet and in the mental retardation of his bride, Lucynell Carter, whom he marries to get her mother's car. We also see grotesquerie in action when the mother gives the retarded girl to Mr. Shiflet to be married, and he leaves her in "The Hot Spot" (a restaurant similar to Red Sammy's in

"A Good Man Is Hard to Find") and takes off with the car. As Mr. Head in "The Artificial Nigger" denies his grandson, Nelson, Mr. Shiflet not only denies, but completely abandons, Lucynell.

Similar to the humor in "The Artificial Nigger," the humor here is found primarily in dialogue and description, rather than in action. All the characters in this story are extremely limited, extremely ignorant, making the following passage where Mr. Shiflet tries to worm his way into the Carters' home humorously ironic:

> "I told you you could hang around and work for food," she said, "if you don't mind sleeping in that car yonder."
>
> "Why listen, lady," he said with a grin of delight, "the monks of old slept in their coffins!"
>
> "They wasn't as advanced as we are," the old woman said. (149)

Although the story is humorous in parts, the fact that Shiflet abandons the pitiful Lucynell at a roadside lunchonette makes for a particularly unsettling conclusion. As Shiflet drives away from The Hot Spot, two dark rain clouds descend--one in front of the car, and one behind--both foreshadowing the dark path which lies ahead of him. As Mr. Shiflet drives to Mobile we are reminded of Mr. Head and Nelson in "The Artificial

Nigger," who at least had the sense to leave the city. Instead, Mr. Shiflet races toward the city, and we know whatever bad luck befalls him is well deserved. Because he shows no remorse and has no transformation in the end (unlike Mr. Head in "The Artificial Nigger") the story does not have as positive an impact as many of O'Connor's stories.

The longest story in the collection, "The Displaced Person," O'Connor wrote in October, 1954. It is a powerful story in which humor, grotesquerie, and religion are present. But the thrust of this story is different from all of O'Connor's other works. Ignorance and prejudice of a different kind are exposed here. In "The Displaced Person" O'Connor is attacking blind American patriotism--the "my country right or wrong" attitude. The story takes place at the end of World War II on a Southern farm run by the once widowed, twice divorced Mrs. McIntyre. The characters in this story immediately remind us of the characters in "Good Country People." And though this story has perhaps a weaker conclusion, it is most like "Good Country People" in its quality.

Mrs. McIntyre is strong and self-sufficient at the beginning of the story as is Mrs. Hopewell in "Good Country People." She has various black and white farm hands working for her and has a friendly relationship with Mrs. Shortley, the wife of the dairy hand, who is

an exact replica of Mrs. Freeman in "Good Country People." In the opening pages of the story Mrs. McIntyre and Mrs. Shortley discuss the hiring of a Polish farm hand, whom they call the Displaced Person. The Catholic Church has arranged this job opportunity for Mr. Guizac; and Father Flynn, who introduces the worker to Mrs. McIntyre, becomes an important character in the story.

Like many Americans who seem to think the world begins and ends at this country's borders, Mrs. McIntyre and Mrs. Shortley know nothing of the Guizac family or of Poland, but tend to blame all the world's evils on Europe and such immigrants. The two women discuss decorating colors for the new family's shack, and, since the Guizacs don't speak English, Mrs. Shortley assumes the following:

> "They can't talk," Mrs. Shortley said. "You reckon they'll know what color even is?" and Mrs. McIntyre had said that after what those people had been through, they should be grateful for anything they could get. She said to think how lucky they were to escape from over there and come to a place like this. (196)

Later Mrs. Shortley utters more ignorance when she says of all Europeans,

> "They're full of crooked ways. They never have advanced or reformed. They got the same religion as a thousand years ago. It could only be the devil responsible for that. Always fighting amongst each other. Disputing. And then they get us into it. Ain't they got us into it twict already and we ain't got no more sense than to go over there and settle it for them . . . ." (206)

O'Connor does an excellent job of portraying the ugly American in Mrs. Shortley, just as she accurately portrays the Southern bigot in Mr. Head of "The Artificial Nigger."

The irony of this story occurs when Mr. Guizac, the Displaced Person, turns out to vastly more intelligent and hard-working that Mr. and Mrs. Shortley, and the couple end up leaving the farm before they are fired. The day they leave, Mrs. Shortley dies; and Mrs. McIntyre is left with the Guizacs, the black farm hands, and Mrs. Shortley's prophecy that the Displaced Person will take over the farm. Mrs. McIntyre becomes so distraught over this prophecy that she begins to hate the Displaced Person, and she wants him to leave her farm. The peak of the story, in terms of grotesque action, comes when, as Mrs. McIntyre confronts Mr. Guizac to tell him he is fired, the brake of his tractor slips. He is crushed and ultimately killed by

the machine. After the Displaced Person's death, all the other farm hands quit, and Mrs. McIntyre is left frail, alone, and lonely.

In this story that ends grotesquely and pessimistically, O'Connor is of course digging deeper than a cursory plot summary suggests. She is exposing the ignorance of those who look at all foreigners as more than aliens--not only different, but inferior to Americans. In "The Displaced Person" the blacks, the Shortleys, and Mrs. McIntyre (representing all Americans) and the Displaced Person (representing the rest of the world) cannot work together, so they all fail--they all become Displaced Persons. O'Connor's subject is different in this story, but her message is the same strong stab at prejudice and ignorance we find in so many of her other works. The theme, humor, and characterization in "The Displaced Person" all work well together and are as successful here as they are in "Good Country People." What is not as successful is the conclusion.

What is so good about "Good Country People" is its light-hearted humor, dealt out consistently from beginning to end, and its positive ending. O'Connor said it was almost effortless to write; likewise, it is effortless to read. Yet it has a strong, uncontrived message that is successfully relayed to the reader. In "The Displaced Person" the conclusion is not as smooth; it seems contrived. There is also a difference

in the violence of the two stories. The death of the Displaced Person is violently grotesque, whereas the ending of "Good Country People" is humorously grotesque.

Another contrived issue in "The Displaced Person" is the issue of religion. Throughout the story Mrs. McIntyre has a rather cold relationship with Father Flynn. She is not really interested in accepting him or his religion, but, in the end, it is the priest alone who comes to visit Mrs. McIntyre:

> A numbness developed in one of her legs and her hands and head began to jiggle and eventually she had to stay in bed all the time with only a colored woman to wait on her. Her eyesight grew steadily worse and she lost her voice altogether. Not many people remembered to come out to the country to see her except the old priest. He came regularly once a week with a bag of breadcrumbs, and after he had fed these to the peacock, he would come in and sit by the side of her bed and explain the doctrines of the church. (235)

Evidently the Church becomes the one sustaining element in Mrs. McIntyre's life, but this seems unlikely since Mrs. McIntyre experiences no epiphany. After the Displaced Person dies and Mrs. McIntyre's health fails her, nowhere is any transformation in her character

mentioned.

Though most of "The Displaced Person" is excellent, O'Connor might have had a better story if she had ended it with the death of Mr. Guizac. The beauty of "Good Country People" is that there is no explanation or intervention in the conclusion. It ends at a more appropriate place than does "The Displaced Person."

At any rate, as far as O'Connor's conclusions go, the less said, in terms of explanation, the better. The stories which contain less physical violence and more meshing of grotesquerie with religion and humor are her best. The violence may be appropriate for thematic development and realism, but it is with a story such as "Good Country People," where the grotesquerie and religious implications are gentler, and the humor is stronger, that reading Flannery O'Connor is both challenging and satisfying. In an article written for _Ms. Magazine_ entitled "The Reconstruction of Flannery O'Connor," Alice Walker writes the following:

> She was an artist who thought she might die young and who then knew for certain she would. Her view of her characters pierces right through to the skull. Whatever her characters' color or social position she saw them as she saw herself, in light of imminent mortality. Some of her stories . . . seem to be written out of the despair that must,

> on occasion, have come from this bleak vision, but it is for her humor that she is most enjoyed and remembered. (104)

As we have seen, O'Connor's humor is present in her work for more than just the reader's amusement. The humor always carries serious intent. In Conversations with Eudora Welty, Welty comments on Flannery O'Connor's statement, "'Mine is a comic art, but that does not detract from its seriousness'" (Prenshaw 59). Welty says,

> I think Flannery O'Connor was absolutely right in what she says: that the fact that something is comic does not detract from its seriousness, because the comic and serious are not opposites. You might as well say satire is not serious, and it's probably the most deadly serious of any form of writing, even though it makes you laugh. No, I think comedy is able to tackle the most serious matters that there are. (59)

It is this comic approach to dealing with life's most serious, most difficult problems that O'Connor so successfully employs. Her God and her religion are of course ever present in, and very important to, her works. But as Alice Walker states, it is for her humor that she is most appreciated.

In addition to the stories in the volume, A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories, Flannery O'Connor wrote two novels, Wise Blood and The Violent Bear It Away, the stories in Everything That Rises Must Converge, and hundreds of letters and essays. Each work is intense in its religious implications, unforgettable in its quest for realism through grotesquerie, and wonderfully human and earthy in its humor. She was a master of her particular art form--of realistically portraying Southerners to the most minute detail. Louis D. Rubin says,

> A hallmark of Flannery O'Connor's fine art of fiction is the observation of the Georgia plain folk. She knew how they talk and how they think. She could pick up the incongruities that make for comedy and reproduce them, down to the most delicate perception of voice and gesture. That, at least as much as her theological insight, is what made her an important writer. (47)

Since the only real difference between a Southerner and anyone else is his accent, what O'Connor really does is to force the reader (Southern or not) to look inward. She was a genius in her understanding of human nature. We realize her genius each time we read of the antics of the grandmother, Mr. Head, or Joy-Hulga--each time we hear them speak--each time we consider her masterful

application of the three literary elements: the technique of grotesquerie, the humorous tone, and the religious themes. A admirer of Flannery O'Connor's work feels that even with her novels, her volumes of stories, her essays, and her letters--it is not enough for us, not nearly enough.

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