2002

Religious Overtones in the Writings of Flannery O'Connor

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"Religious Overtones in the Writings of Flannery O'Connor"

Submitted to fulfill the College Scholars/Senior Honors Requirement

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April 20, 2002

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Introduction—*Why did I choose this topic?*

Growing up in the rural south, deeply interested in literature and religion, I was immediately enthralled by the world of Flannery O'Connor's fiction. Discovering O'Connor in my teenage years meant discovering a fictional society so close to my own surroundings that the teachings of her stories immediately began to coexist with my morals. The Bible has been a steadfast part of my existence for as long as I can remember; however, upon reading O'Connor, I was able to reread the Bible, discovering new meanings and placing its teachings more firmly within the framework of my everyday surroundings—surroundings that I first saw in print amidst the stories of Flannery O'Connor. I left the home that so reminded me of O'Connor's fiction almost four years ago, yet her work never fails to be immensely powerful and eye opening.

My experience with O'Connor is hardly unique, but hardly common, either. While O'Connor's work is often praised as piercing and enlightening, it is also regularly damned as grotesque and exaggerated. However, O'Connor firmly believed that the grotesque was the most effective way to communicate belief to the unbelieving reader. In her book Mystery and Manners, O'Connor describes this technique:

> When you can assume your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal means of talking to it; when you have to assume it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock--to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures (34).

Though her techniques are often off-putting for some readers, O'Connor's Christian message is consistent—that we need to believe in Christ and accept Him in order to be saved or else live lives in constant struggle with our denial of Him.

It would be impossible to deny that O'Connor's writing contains a great wealth of religious elements; however, many scholars disagree as to how well her theological messages are communicated. This discrepancy interests me greatly, and as a result, I would like for my senior project to focus upon the religious elements of Flannery O'Connor's writings, taking into account the criticism directed at O'Connor, primarily that which deals with whether or not her writing accomplishes the task of conveying a Christian message. Hopefully through my readings and research, I will be able to deliver a long paper, deliberating the religious relevance of O'Connor's writing, contrasting the opinions of those scholars who believe O'Connor succeeded with those who do not.

Early Writings

The earliest published stories of Flannery O'Connor are those she wrote while pursuing her Master's at the University of Iowa. These first six stories deal heavily with the predominant themes of southern writing—race, class, and religion. "The Geranium," published in February of 1946, tells the story of Old Dudley whose misfortunes are echoed by the flower he views from his window. While O'Connor's first story makes no real reference to faith and theology, it is certainly worth mentioning that O'Connor returned to the situation in "Judgement Day," the final story of her career, recasting "The Geranium" with a Christian vision (which I will describe at length later in this paper).

However, it is not until O'Connor's third story "Wildcat" that religion comes to the forefront. Even from the introduction of the characters, it is apparent that O'Connor is answering to a higher calling. Gabriel, Mose (presumably short for "Moses), and Luke are on a hunt for a wildcat, tracking the animal through the dense woods. The story is so filled with religious imagery that when Granpaw declares at the story's opening "You oughter be able to smell good enough to git our names" (26), it is apparent that the story is filled with a great deal of themes intended for the reader to "git."

While Gabriel is in the woods by himself, he grows increasingly paranoid that the wildcat is close by and that certain death is waiting. Feeling the wildcat growing nearer, Gabriel whispers, "Lord waitin' on me. He don't want me with my face tore open. Why don't you go on, Wildcat, why you want me?" (31) Gabriel envisions the Lord and a troupe of angels with gold vestments for him, standing on the opposite edge of the riverbanks, waiting to judge him. Whether or not Gabriel's images are real or imagined is certainly debatable. However, what is apparent to the reader is the change in Gabriel's personality following his brush with mortal fear. The story closes with the other men poking fun at Gabriel, who replies only with the solid reminder, "I knows what I knows" (32). The story attests to the fact that so many of us come privately to God in times of crisis and also illustrates that in a community filled with shouted sermons, oftentimes the most earnest prayers are those that are whispered.

At no point in O'Connor's early writings are the struggles of faith, and of acting upon it, more prevalent than in "The Turkey." The story tells of Ruller, a young boy of eleven, hoping to impress his parents by killing a turkey. This is a difficult task, and as the story progresses, Ruller becomes increasingly frustrated with the prospects of

catching a wild turkey. After a great deal of searching and running through the forest, Ruller finally spots a turkey wobbling across the field. However, as soon as the boy decides to go after it, the turkey darts across a clearing and into the thickest section of the woods, vanishing without a trace. Realizing that all his efforts have been for naught, the boy is described as follows:

> He turned over on his stomach and let his cheek rest right on the ground, dirty or not. He had torn his shirt and scratched his arms and got a knot on his forehead—he could feel it rising just a little, it was going to be a big one all right—all for nothing (46).

It is at this point of intense frustration that the boy begins to curse—for the first time in his life. Beginning with "hell" and proceeding to "God," before eventually moving to "damn it," and numerous variations and combinations of phrases both biblical and profane, Ruller remembers the times his brother got into trouble for his language and begins to curse wildly at all things in sight. Ruller then reminds himself of the commandment "Though shalt not take the name of the Lord, Thy God, in vain" and begins to laugh, thinking and muttering as many appalling phrases as he can think of. Ruller also fantasizes of alcohol and sex, then murder and theft, before finally meditating upon Hell. Just as he is realizing that he may be doomed to spend a lifetime outside of Christian morality, Ruller spots a turkey, freshly shot, dead on the ground, perfect for supper. As critic Kellie Wells writes, "Ruller reads this as a moment of grace, imagines that this lifeless turkey is evidence that he's been chosen by God for some special purpose, and sees favorable portent in the happy fortuity of those 'blood soaked' feathers" (23).

This scene of the turkey lying dead in the thicket brings to mind the story of Abraham and his son Isaiah. In Genesis, Abraham is told by God to take his son to the

top of a hill and sacrifice him for the Lord. However, upon reaching the site of the intended sacrifice, it is revealed to Abraham that his son's life will be spared. The Bible says, "Abraham looked and there in the thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place 'The Lord will provide" (Genesis 22:13-14).

The parallels between these two stories are quite interesting. First of all, both passages consist of an animal being sacrificed in the place of human life. In the Bible, Abraham does not kill his son, for a ram has taken his place. In "The Turkey," Ruller immediately reassumes his previous role as a moral young boy at the moment his sees the turkey trapped in the thicket. In this case, the life of a turkey is sacrificed for a young boy's return to innocence. O'Connor writes, "Maybe God was in the bush now, waiting for him to make up his mind...He guessed God had stopped him before it was too late. He should be very thankful. Thank you, he said" (49).

At this point, Ruller's wild imaginings find him dreaming up things to do with his life—things that will be found pleasing unto God: "Maybe God wanted him to be a preacher. He thought of Bing Crosby and Spencer Tracy. He might find a place for boys to stay who were going bad" (49). Finally, Ruller decides to focus his attention upon the immediate good he can do. He decides that he will give a dime (all the money he is carrying) to the first beggar he can find. However, this line of thought is quite interesting, for it appears that Ruller's faith is based upon what he has seen expressed by Hollywood, rather than that expressed in the Bible. Also of note is that in the film *Boy's Town* (which Ruller is remembering), Spencer Tracy plays a priest, though Ruller thinks of him as a preacher. While this is a small difference, it is one of the few instances in

O'Connor's writing in which a distinction is made between O'Connor's Catholicism and the Protestant faith that is generally more prevalent in the south.

However, the story closes with a flurry of events that call into question themes of penance and motivation. While Ruller succeeds in giving away his money to a beggar, he is also aware that the woman may not actually need the money: "She was an old woman whom everybody in town said had more money than anybody in town because she had been begging for twenty years" (52). In addition to that, it seems that Ruller is giving this offering in order to pay for his earlier wild outburst of sin. With this in mind, the fact that Ruller's altruism is inspired by a film is even more interesting, for it seems that O'Connor considers a "real frustration" more divine than a materialistic faith, inspired by an image in a film, not a story from the Bible.

The final scene of the story describes Ruller proudly showing off his turkey to an older hunter. While he is describing the turkey's death (or at least his version of it) to the hunter, the man takes the turkey from him and walks away, spitting tobacco juice and rendering Ruller so shocked that he is unable to take any action by which to retrieve his lost bird. This final scene echoes the oft-quoted theme "The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away," and it is here that we find an eleven year-old whose conscience has ran the gamut of spiritual questioning—all in the same afternoon. O'Connor writes, "Something Awful was tearing behind him with its arms rigid and its fingers ready to clutch" (53). In this situation, the "something awful" is the doubt that Ruller has never experienced before today.

From my reading, I can see two interpretations for what this doubt represents. First of all, it can be the shaking of faith that many experience, just beginning in Ruller,

and that may one day destroy him. This doubt could be the first step in leading Ruller from being a young boy who strikes out in search of food for his family into becoming a hardened man who trusts nothing. On the other hand, this doubt can be a necessary step leading Ruller from being one who bases his faith on Hollywood into a man with a more firmly grounded theology.

"The Turkey" certainly points firmly in the direction of the religious themes that dominate O'Connor's later work. Following the six stories included in her Master's thesis, O'Connor's next published work was her first novel, Wise Blood. The novel burns with an intensity that is matched by its piercing themes of redemption, retribution, and desperate faith. Flannery O'Connor took five years to complete Wise Blood in its present form, and the result is a work that took O'Connor's writing down the curvy, gray road of theological investigation.

Wise Blood

When Flannery O'Connor set out to write her first novel, she wrote, "I must tell you how I work. I don't have my novel outlined and I have to write to discover what I am doing. Like the old lady, I don't know so well what I think until I see what I say; then I have to say it over again" (ix). Though from her own words it would seem that Wise Blood would turn out to be a formless work, lacking in intensity, this is certainly not the case. O'Connor's tale of Hazel Motes is unforgettable, direct in purpose and effect, demonstrating the power of faith, and of one man's futile struggle to live life outside God's range of sight. As John Desmond writes, "Viewed from the standpoint of

O'Connor as artist, the novel concerns the problem of how to make the Christian historical vision manifest in the present irreligious world" (52).

Perhaps O'Connor provided the best summation of her purpose in writing this novel with the added author's note in the preface to the second printing of Wise Blood. O'Connor wrote, "That belief in Christ is to some a matter of life and death has been a stumbling block for readers who would prefer to think it a matter of no great consequence" (1). In the characters of Wise Blood, the reader comes into close contact with men whose complex wrestling matches with faith lead them to the brink of social insanity, as well as the grotesque.

The story begins with a description of Hazel Motes, a discharged serviceman who "knew by the time he was twelve years old that he was going to be a preacher" (22). However, upon entering the service, the man from Eastrod, Tennessee, begins to question his faith more and more, shunning social interactions and any trace of fun, leaving him absolutely miserable, his increasing sadness causing him to think more and more that religion must be untrue. Brooding upon this, Motes reasons, "He had all the time he could want to study his soul in and assure himself that it was not there" (24).

In a sense, Motes' dissolution of faith is better understood if its origins are recognized. Motes becomes a Christian at a young age, and his conversion is described dramatically, "That boy had been redeemed and Jesus wasn't going to leave him ever" (17). As a result, Motes reasons that if he hopes to avoid Jesus, then he needs to avoid sin. This line of thought leads to his decision to become a preacher, for this vocation will grant him all the more reason to keep from sin. This motivation obviously conflicts with the teachings of Christianity, for instead of fostering a close relationship with Christ,

Motes hopes to avoid Him entirely. Instead of seeking out salvation through Jesus, Motes seeks out piety in order to escape judgment. This contradiction positions Motes' faith on rocky ground from the start, rendering his Christianity quite vulnerable upon his leaving home. From here on, Motes' interpersonal relations are marred by the fact that everyone he comes into contact with seems to know Jesus and assumes he does as well, for he dresses just like a preacher. The fact that Motes appears to be a clergyman, though he has come to hate religion, is but one example of the complex irony O'Connor employs within this work.

Since Motes is consistently informing others (and reminding himself) that he doesn't "believe in anything" (32), it soon becomes apparent that one of this novel's many themes is just how difficult it is to live completely devoid of faith. This struggle comes to fruition when Motes comes into contact with Asa Hawks, a seemingly blind street preacher. Upon meeting Hawks, Motes is told by him to repent and tell others about Christ. However, having a blind man randomly accuse him of blasphemy and fornication is more than Motes can handle, and he climbs to the roof of an auditorium and begins to preach in response to Hawks, though preaching of a new kind of church—the Church Without Christ. Yet, throughout his outburst, Asa Hawks continues preaching fiery Christianity to those who pass by.

The Church without Christ, in Motes' vision, is a church that preaches that man was indeed *not* created in God's image in order to serve God. However, one theme of this philosophy that I find particularly interesting is that even though Motes expresses his atheism at every opportunity, he still feels the need to found a church in order to express

it. For someone who seems to hold such a profound disdain for organized religion, it appears that for Haze Motes, the need for regular communion is still quite present.

Enoch Emery meets Motes that day in the street, and though Motes seems annoyed by his company, Emery makes every effort to befriend him, citing that he is eighteen years old, on his own, and has been unable to make any friends in town. Nevertheless, it eventually becomes apparent that there is more to Emery than what is initially visible. Chapter five begins "That morning Enoch Emery knew when he woke up that today the person he could show it to was going to come. He knew by his blood. He had wise blood like his daddy" (79). When Enoch shows his secret to the closest acquaintance he has to a friend, Motes responds harshly to the mummy, running out of the room and shouting for Asa Hawks' address. Perhaps Emery's odd worship of a shrunken man caused him to gain a newfound interest in religion, leaving him with the compulsion to seek out the preacher. Perhaps the weirdness of the situation caused him to react so strongly, or maybe the corpse caused him to consider his own mortality. Regardless, the scene ends with Motes not so certain that he is as *clean* as he has been claiming and with Emery recognizing that there is indeed a higher purpose for his existence. At the chapter's close, O'Connor writes, "Then he knew that whatever was expected of him was only just beginning" (100). In regards to this scene, O'Connor wrote in a letter to "A" in 1960, "Haze is repulsed by the shriveled man he sees merely because it is hideous. He has a picture of his new jesus--shriveled as it is. There it certainly does have meaning for Haze....Haze, even though a primitive, is full of the poison of the modern world" (50).

However, this scene also establishes the differences in spiritual depth that exist between Motes and Emery. In this manner, Enoch Emery is used as a gauge by which to measure Motes' spiritual conflict. Describing this, John F. Desmond writes, "[Motes'] fanaticism is counterpointed by...Emery, whose behavior is comic on the natural, rather than on the religious level. Enoch embodies all the predictable determinism of the natural order against which Haze's mysterious identity shines forth" (41). In placing such strong faith and fascination upon a hidden corpse, Enoch Emery serves as an example of one whose misguided obsessions are at odds with those seeking out deeper religious truth. However, Enoch's behavior seems to be more the result of social starvation than of spiritual shallowness. This idea is best explained as Desmond writes, "Enoch wants only to find a friend and fit into the world and so allows himself to be governed by the world's conventions" (106). In Motes, Enoch sees a man propelled by a quest for faith, whether he realizes it or not. That is why Enoch Emery chooses to share his gift with him, for Motes is someone with whom he feels he can strike up a friendship.

From this point on, the story deals primarily with Motes' relationship with Hawks and his daughter, Lily Sabbath. By the story's close, it is revealed that Hawks never actually blinded himself and that his daughter wants nothing more than to experience a sexual relationship with Motes. Lily Sabbath sums up her state of mind in saying, "I shall not enter the kingdom of heaven anyway so I don't see what difference it makes" (119). This cynical statement of predestination not only applies to her way of life but also to Motes and the innate faith that he has no hope of giving up entirely. By the time his life (and struggle with faith) has ended, Motes has blinded himself, and spent a good portion of his final days pacing the floor of his room with shoes lined with rocks and

broken glass. When his landlady asks him, "What do you walk on rocks for?" (222) Motes only answers "It don't make any difference for what, I'm paying" (222). When Hazel Motes finally passes away in the backseat of a police car, he has become the obsession of the woman who owns his apartment building, so much that she agrees that he no longer has to pay his monthly rent money (the reason he was picked up by the cops in the first place) and can live with her for free. The company of Motes, a blind, elderly man, who spends his days punishing himself for his past indiscretions of faith, is worth much more to her than the price of rent. Scholar Peter Hawkins describes this scene in this manner:

> By this point, our view of Mrs. Flood has already changed from that of a cartoon landlady, mercenary and suspicious, to a pathetic old woman offering herself as a "home" and a "place" in an otherwise desolate world. Motes gives her no more encouragement in death than in life, but her need is such that she will settle for a blank stare and no rent, anything rather than nothing. Her words spoken to the dead man are at once poignant and absurd. (32)

That O'Connor can transform the reader's perception of a character from ridiculous to tragic in the span of so few pages is what makes her writing so powerful. O'Connor gazes deep into her characters and expects readers to do the same, recognizing that both Motes and Mrs. Flood are indeed walking *backwards to Bethlehem*.

However, not all impressions of O'Connor's work are as complimentary as mine. For example, later in Hawkins' article, he writes, "O'Connor's occasional overstatement of the religious grows out of her profound uneasiness with her readers. How could they be expected to know unless they were told?" (35). Desmond discusses Wise Blood in great length, meditating upon whether or not O'Connor was wholly successful in expressing Christian theology. At the start of his essay, "*Wise Blood*: The Rain of

History", Desmond writes, "The difficulties O'Connor encountered...involve artistic problems in the relationship between image-making and vision, specifically between analogy and comedy, problems not unexpected for a young writer *congenitally innocent of theory*" (51). Desmond goes on to note the discordance between the harsh world that Motes inhabits and the redemption he hopes to find. The task of uniting these opposing worlds is obviously difficult, and as a result, it is not surprising that many scholars find shortcomings in O'Connor's undertaking.

However, despite becoming acquainted with this criticism, I am very much inclined to disagree. The very aspects of O'Connor's writing that are found displeasing by the aforementioned scholars, I find to be what makes her work burn so strongly. In drawing religious doctrine from pagan environments, O'Connor causes the faith of her characters to stand out from their faithless backgrounds, rendering tragedy, emotion, and ugliness in an effort to exude the beauty of faith. Though it appears that many critics disagree, I can't help but feel that the discordances in O'Connor's writing renders her stories both unique and powerful.

When O'Connor was writing her stories, she couldn't have imagined the amount of shock value involved with the contemporary entertainment industry. I find this to be very interesting, for the grotesque elements in her work rival some of the most distasteful output of current literature, music, and film. One element that renders shocking details to be so strong is simply how memorable they are. Simply put, it is impossible to forget the brutal self-destruction that takes place in Wise Blood; images of blinding oneself and walking miles with rocks in one's shoes in order to attain divinity are too strong for even the most jaded reader to forget.

Sheer memorability is not the only justification I hold for O'Connor's unorthodox techniques, however. In addition, I feel that the brutality of her writing accentuates her serious purpose. If O'Connor is truly writing to spread the Christian word, then she hopes effectively to save souls with her work. With this in mind, an eternity in Hell pales in comparison to even O'Connor's most punishing moments. O'Connor held religion in such high regard that editing her work to render it more pleasant to readers would only detract from her cause, and as a result, she chose to express her message in the most explicit manner possible, regardless of how unpalatable this sometimes seemed.

Speaking on the grotesque, and its relationship to Christianity, O'Connor writes, "My own feeling is that writers who see by the light of their Christian faith will have, in these times, the sharpest eyes for the grotesque, for the perverse, and for the unacceptable" (33). With this quote, O'Connor is saying that Christian writers, due to their faith, are better able to see the distasteful elements of modern society and are therefore better able to describe them. While this may be true, I have heard many readers express concern as to why O'Connor is unable to lure people gently into accepting Christ, instead, choosing to magnify the darkest elements of life in an effort to bring readers to redemption. In response to this, I feel that O'Connor explains this conflict in saying, "The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural" (33). Earlier, I mentioned the shocking elements of modern entertainment, comparing their shock value to the shock value of O'Connor's writing. With the onslaught of modern entertainment's use of distasteful images in order to deliver an effect, O'Connor's writing is even more pertinent in the

contemporary social climate—using the trappings of modern culture to expose the shortcomings of modern culture in hopes of bringing others to the understanding beneath which she is burdened.

While O'Connor's first six stories were comparably straightforward in style, the difficult techniques used in Wise Blood confused some while enthralling others. However, it is this blending of things worldly with things religious that remained one of the chief hallmarks of O'Connor's writing throughout the remainder of her life. These themes dominate her first collection of short fiction, A Good Man is Hard to Find, a dozen stories published in April of 1955.

A Good Man is Hard to Be

Three Young Men, and their struggle to find faith

Perhaps at no place else in O'Connor's writing are the themes of faith, race, social class, and violence blended together so seamlessly as in her story "A Good Man is Hard to Find". This tale provided the title for O'Connor's first published volume of short stories, released in April of 1955. From my reading, the first character of immediate interest is the grandmother who is riding with her family to Florida, though she would greatly prefer a trip to East Tennessee. The car ride is filled with grandmother's small-minded outpourings regarding race and the superiority of the people from *her time*, as well as anecdotes that usually position minorities and the poor as the butt of jokes. However, the story in which the grandmother seems most interested is the one in the

day's paper dealing with an escaped criminal who is simply referred to as "the Misfit." As fate would have it, when the family's car breaks down, the first help to arrive is the Misfit and a couple of his partners.

O'Connor utilizes this scene in order to demonstrate the fault in associating social class with character. In trying to convince the Misfit to take pity on her and her family, the grandmother repeatedly comments, "I know you're a good man....I know you must come from nice people" (127). However, the shortcomings in equating these impressions are evident in the misfit's reply, "Yes mam, finest people in the world...God never made a finer woman than my mother and my daddy's heart was pure gold" (127). What is expressed in this scenario is that being of noble birth does not necessarily a noble man make.

The story's conclusion raises an intense debate regarding religion, and it becomes apparent that the Misfit's struggle has its roots firmly planted in spiritual questioning. The Misfit says, "It's some that can live their whole life out without asking about it and it's others has to know why it is" (129). As the grandmother's family is being taken to the woods to be murdered one by one, she tries to convince the Misfit to pray, but to no avail. The Misfit tells the grandmother the story of his life, of his wide range of occupations and of his troubles with the law, concluding that he needs no help from God or anyone else. Instead of believing that any help can be received from the Lord, the Misfit blames Jesus for all his confusion, saying:

> Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead, and He shouldn't have done it. He thrown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then its nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn't, 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).

The Misfit explains that it is this sort of meditation that has led him to his present state: not knowing whether or not Jesus was the Son of God has brought him to take the most extreme path away from God's intended way of life. Perhaps he could have just as easily taken the opposite extreme, but definite proof of Jesus' divinity seems to be all that can change his mind.

Examining the grandmother's personality from a spiritual standpoint is also quite complex. In her final minutes, the grandmother is continuously admonishing the Misfit to pray, reminding him that there is still hope for him. Her final sentence, spoken while reaching out to touch the Misfit on the shoulder, seems to be one of absolute love, her telling him, "You're one of my own children!" (132). Whether or not her apparent empathy is the result of genuine concern for the Misfit is the key point of debate, and it seems that the Misfit can no longer consider this conflict, for at the moment the grandmother reaches out to touch him, he shoots her three times in the chest. Comparing the Misfit's stern refusal to accept the Christian faith with the grandmother's association of class with morality, not to mention her use of evangelism to prevent her being murdered, the two seem to represent polar opposites of the spiritual spectrum, "...he as a profound unbeliever, she as a superficial Christian" (Hawkins 43).

Looking down at her corpse, the Misfit comments, "She would have been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life" (133). While many interpretations of this statement exist, I feel that this summation is a description that holds true for believers (of any faith) who act in response to a fear of punishment rather than an inclination toward altruism. In my life, I have sat through many sermons

dealing with the horrors of Hell. It seems that the closer one draws to judgement, the more sincere one's actions become. The grandmother, when faced with almost certain death, began to love the kind of man she would have looked down upon only a half-hour earlier. However, judging from his final remarks regarding the grandmother, it seems that the Misfit feels that the grandmother's appraisal of him was more desperation than genuine love.

Nevertheless, I feel that a definite judgment call regarding the grandmother's salvation is impossible to formulate. For me, it is difficult to balance the seemingly insincere character of the grandmother with her final, unabashed demonstration of love towards the Misfit. O'Connor clouds this debate as well, for the final description of the grandmother's corpse is filled with symbolism that can be interpreted to mean that her eternal fate may be much more favorable than many readers (including myself) originally believe. O'Connor writes of the grandmother, "...(she) half sat and half lay in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a child's and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky" (132). In death, lying in a puddle of her own blood in a ditch on the side of the road, it seems that O'Connor would have us to believe that the grandmother is actually on her way to a better place, though I am certain that the Misfit would object. The image of the woman lying dead in the ditch is tragic; however, if O'Connor's intention was for her Christian readers to look beyond the guts and gore, it is imperative to note two primary details of this description.

First of all, the grandmother is described as having her legs folded beneath her like a child. The grandmother's seating seems to be reminiscent of one kneeling; along with the *child* reference, this description brings to mind Jesus' teachings regarding

childlike faith. Mark 10:15 finds Jesus preaching, "Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it at all." Undergoing the horror of watching her family killed, along with the certainty that she will be next, has stripped the grandmother of all her worldly pretensions, transforming her faith from that of a superficial adult to that of a sincere child, and between her final, gasped breaths, this innocence has lead her to demonstrate love for the Misfit. With so much discussion regarding Jesus, it is my belief that comparing the grandmother's position in death to that of a child was certainly intentional, and with this reference coupled with the description of the cloudless sky, it stands to reason that in death, there may be nothing standing between the grandmother's horrible death and an eternity in heaven.

Regardless, I feel that compelling arguments exist either way—that the grandmother could be spending eternity in heaven, or that she could not. After much consideration, I feel that perhaps this vagueness was O'Connor's original intention, not to demonstrate a certain path to paradise, but instead, to provoke discussion regarding the sincerity (or lack thereof) in the case of the grandmother's debatable salvation. If readers would apply the moral microscope to the grandmother's motivations, then hopefully, they would do the same for their own, with the result being a more honest faith. Also evident in this final scene is that here the grandmother is given a choice of eternal salvation, though her sincerity (or opportunity to achieve such) is purchased at the horrible price of her family's death.

Viewing the Misfit as a Christ figure should certainly cause one fully to reconsider the seemingly sincere prayers that consistently emerge in times of crisis. When we are guilty of concentrating the majority of our prayers during times of intense

crisis, how can we possibly expect God to respond favorably? When viewed as a statement regarding prayers in times of trouble, O'Connor's depiction of the Misfit's response delivers a startling lesson.

However, the Misfit's statement that there is no "real pleasure in life but meanness" does little to qualify the Misfit as a common Christ figure. Instead, this statement reveals the severity with which he has chosen to live a life in direct opposition to generally accepted morality. Nevertheless, this can be seen as but one more type of fundamentalism—if one chooses not to be as pious as possible, then it would seem sensible to live as violently as one can. The Bible teaches against lukewarm believers, admonishing us to be hot or cold but not in between. With this as a guideline, the Misfit might be perceived as more morally sound than the average backsliding Christian. The reader is certainly not expected to agree, or even identify with, the Misfit's worldview. However, in exposing how severe his perception has become, it is interesting to consider that if he were a Christian, whether or not he would live his life as fervently for Christ as he has against Him.

If the Misfit's violent state initially seems to be an overly extreme response to theological broodings, then one should consider the case of Harry Ashfield from O'Connor's "The River." Harry is a young boy who is taken by his sitter to see a faith healer, the Reverend Bevel Summers. Harry evokes a great deal of sympathy, for it is obvious that his parents are hardly that by any qualification other than blood; his father seems to have little contact with the boy, declining to help dress him at the story's commencement, and his mother is too hungover to get out of bed.

In addition to this, Harry has grown up hearing very little about God, as it seems that his parents hold few serious beliefs regarding Christianity, or anything, for that matter. As Harry is first told about the Bible by Mrs. Connin, his sitter, O'Connor writes:

> He had found out already this morning that he had been made by a carpenter named Jesus Christ. Before he thought it had been a doctor named Sladewall, 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).

Harry's lack of theological knowledge disturbs Mrs. Connin greatly, and she reads to him from a children's version of the Bible, a book that Harry eventually steals, more as a result of a desire to learn than of simply wanting to steal.

When Harry (who has lied, telling Mrs. Connin that his name is Bevel--the same as the faith healer) and his sitter arrive at the river, the scene is of people standing on the riverbank, singing songs and waiting for the preacher to perform a miracle. A woman shouts at the preacher, "I seen you cure a woman oncet! Seen that woman git up and walk out straight where she limped in" (165). However, performing miracles is hardly the preacher's primary intention today. Instead, his immediate purpose is to deliver a spiritual message, telling the woman and all others who expect a miracle, "You might as well go home if that's what you come for" (165).

Instead of preaching on his power to heal, Reverend Bevel Summers proclaims the healing power of God. Using the water he stands in as a metaphor, the reverend preaches, "There ain't but one river and that's the River of Life, made out of Jesus' Blood. That's the river you have to lay your pain in...that's the River that was made to carry sin...lay it in that River of Pain and watch it move away toward the Kingdom of

Christ" (165). While this is going on, Harry watches the preacher, listening to words he does not understand.

Soon, Mrs. Connin lifts Harry above her head, shouting at the preacher that he is a young boy named "Bevel," and that he wants the reverend to pray for his sick mother. Before long, the preacher is telling Harry that he needs to be baptized, saying, "If I baptize you, you'll be able to go to the Kingdom of Christ. You'll be washed in the river of suffering, son, and you'll go by the deep river of life" (168). To this, Harry answers that he would like to be baptized and that he would like his mother to be healed from her current affliction—that of a hangover.

When Mrs. Connin takes Harry home, she first learns of the boy's true name. In addition, it is revealed to the reader that Harry comes from a home in which faith has no hope of thriving. His parents find his Children's Bible, and instead of reading the book, are only able to marvel at how old the publication is and of how much money it must be worth. Sitting down to talk with her son about his baptism, Harry's mother asks, "What did that dolt of a preacher say about me?" (170). This lack of spiritual concern, coupled with a desire for money, reveals how difficult it will be for Bevel to foster a spiritual relationship in such a home.

The closing section of this story is immensely powerful, finding Harry trying to find some real world evidence to corroborate his childlike faith, faith that strikes in stark contrast to his cynical parents. Unfortunately, Harry's innocence leads to his death. The final scene of "The River" is of Harry repeatedly diving deep into the water in which he had been baptized the day before, trying to hold his breath long enough for the current to transport him to the Kingdom of Heaven. O'Connor describes this as such: "He plunged

under once and this time, the waiting current caught him like a long gentle hand...for an instant he was overcome with surprise: then since he was moving quickly and knew that he was getting somewhere all his fury and fear left him" (174). From this passage, it can be reasoned that the boy is drowning, coming to his death in search of the heaven that no one has told him nearly enough about.

In a sense, Harry can be seen as a counterpoint to the grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," for the same childlike faith that the grandmother must return to before she can enter heaven is what effectively leads to Harry's death. Harry dies while searching for the truth, and though this death is certainly shocking, it can also be seen as a divine act of God, drawing the boy to heaven before his faith is gradually suffocated by his unbelieving parents. One can imagine Harry growing up and casting aside any interest in religion, for he is certain to mature in an environment wholly discouraging of a personal relationship with God. Perhaps the reader is not even supposed to feel sorry for Harry at all, for his presence in heaven is certain—his death is the result of an act upon faith, and furthermore, he certainly hasn't yet reached the age of accountability. Nevertheless, it is clear that the boy's death is the result of a desire to learn more about Christianity, weighed against an unbelieving environment; in the end, the two are unable to coexist.

"Good Country People" is yet another selection from O'Connor's first volume of short stories that describes a young man whose struggles with belief lead him to downfall. In the case of Manley Pointer we see a character whose lack of faith leads him to moral derailment and to the emotional destruction of those with whom he comes into contact. What makes this character so striking, in regards to the Misfit and Harry

Ashfield, is that Manley's brand of evil is not the type of behavior that would be sensationalized by the modern media (such as that of a serial killer or of a young boy who drowns in a baptismal pool). Instead, his cruelty is the type that easily goes undetected by everyone except his victims.

The story begins with a description of Mrs. Hopewell, a plantation owner who employs Mrs. Freeman and her two daughters as servants. Mrs. Hopewell, like many of the women in O'Connor's works, separates those she knows into social classes; O'Connor writes of this of her, "She had had plenty of experience with trash" (273). However, Mrs. Hopewell thinks rather highly of her servants, repeatedly referring to them as "good country people." Mrs. Hopewell has a daughter of thirty-two named 'Joy'; the girl has an artificial leg and spends most of her days sitting around the house. It is obvious that she is thought of by everyone in the story as a child, despite her age and the fact that she is highly educated. Much like Harry Ashfield, Joy also undergoes a name change, legally altering her name to 'Hulga' on her twenty-first birthday. This name bothers Mrs. Hopewell greatly: "Mrs. Hopewell was certain that she had thought and thought until she had hit upon the ugliest name in any language" (274).

The plot of the story begins when Manley enters, a Bible salesman whose personality certainly suits him for the role of making sales door-to-door. This is evident by his constant laughter, his eagerness to pay compliments to all around him, and his ability to alter his tone of voice whenever beneficial. In addition to this, Manley is an expert at telling Mrs. Hopewell what she wants to hear, relegating his social status to that of mere, "good country people," much to the delight of Mrs. Hopewell. Perhaps most indicative of Manley's selling technique is the following:

> I guess a lot of boys come telling you they're working their way through college, but I'm not going to tell you that. Somehow, I don't want to go to college. I want to devote my life to *Chrustian* service. See, I got this heart condition. I may not live long...(279).

With these statements, Manley is able not only to convince Mrs. Hopewell that his intentions reach much deeper than simply earning a bit of extra money but also that he is suffering from the same condition as her daughter. This is more than enough to earn him an invitation to stay around for dinner.

After a couple more visits to the house, Manley lures Hulga into an old barn, where he attempts to seduce her, and among other things, manages to remove her artificial leg. The act of having her wooden leg removed strikes Hulga as oddly romantic: "It was like surrendering to him completely. It was like losing her own life and finding it again, miraculously, in his....She was thinking that she would run away with him and every night he would take the leg off and every morning put it back on again" (289).

It is only after this that the true nature of Manley Pointer is revealed. He takes two of his Bibles and opens them. They are both hollow, and one contains a flask of whiskey, the other a contraceptive. When Hulga realizes that Manley hopes to have sex with her, she is greatly bothered by this supposed change of character, saying, "You're a Christian! You're a fine Christian!" (290). Only now does Manley confess that he holds no real religious beliefs: "I hope you don't think that I believe in that crap! I may sell Bibles but I know which end is up and I wasn't born yesterday...And I'll tell you another thing, Hulga, you ain't so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!" (291). The story closes with Manley running away with Hulga's wooden leg, satisfied again in that he has employed a false guise of innocence to outsmart one more victim.

With this closing in mind, it is interesting to examine Hulga's spirituality. As Manley runs away with her leg, as well as her proud identity, it is apparent that she may be brought to a point of reconsidering her view of the world. In O'Connor's Mystery and Manners, she writes of this, "Early in the story, we're presented with the fact that the Ph.D. is spiritually as well as physically crippled. She believes in nothing but her own belief in nothing, and we perceive that there is a wooden part of her soul that corresponds to the wooden leg" (98-9). Writing along the same theme, Desmond notes:

> Manley Pointer's theft of the leg, as perverse as it seems, is in fact a destruction of the false idol which literally has come to embody Hulga's false vision of reality...leaving Hulga at least open to a new way of seeing things--most important, of seeing herself as confounded, contradictory....Manley's theft of the leg has in fact made Hulga potentially free (44).

The close of this story leaves Hulga with no choice but to reevaluate her way of living, as well as her manner of thought.

Hulga's relationship with Manley is that of coming face-to-face with one of her own kind—someone with faith in nothing other than the ability to have faith in nothing. However, the change that comes over her following her encounter with this crooked Bible salesman is one that causes her to realize that her atheism does not render her to be as intellectually deep as she once thought; with Manley, Hulga is able to come to terms with her own limitations, and it appears that this will lead to her no longer casting off religion as mythology for the weaker minded. The oft-quoted statement that the "Lord works in mysterious ways" is evident in "Good Country People," for it seems that the meanness of one nonbeliever is effectively employed to initiate a dramatic spiritual search in another.

In these three stories from A Good Man is Hard to Find, O'Connor describes young males whose lack of spiritual certainty has a detrimental effect upon them, and oftentimes those around them. However, despite the seemingly destructive natures in the cases of the Misfit and Manley Pointer, it is interesting to note that both bring about a sort of spiritual integrity to their victims. Joy/Hulga realizes that her atheism does not necessarily warrant respect, and the Grandmother drops the seclusion of her identity as a 'southern lady' and seems to attempt a kinship with a serial killer. However, unlike the Misfit, Manley Pointer appears to feel no remorse for his actions, but instead, revels in them, bragging to Hulga of all the things he has stolen, and the story ends with the assumption that he will proceed to his next victim. Nevertheless, in this case, I view Manley's way of flourishing as a punishment in itself, since he is unable to create a compelling live of his own, he must find joy in the items he steals from others. Manley's lack of faith causes him to seek out happiness in materialism—he has warped his personality to become a good salesman, and he is a habitual thief. Because of this, I feel that Manley Pointer represents insincerity at the highest level, and I cannot imagine that his lifestyle will result in happiness for long.

Just as Hulga and the grandmother are changed, it would be interesting to see what becomes of the Ashfield family when it is revealed that their son has drowned. Will this serve as an impetus for spiritual reckoning? It is difficult to know for sure, though it seems that the Ashfield parents' situation of faith is highly incorrigible. Nevertheless, the story of Harry Ashfield's death, with all details supplied is certain to have an impact upon someone in this seemingly small town, and certainly succeeds in affecting the reader. In O'Connor's writing, the close reader is quick to note her struggle to reconcile steadfast

Christian faith with an uncaring world. With these three stories, O'Connor succeeds in communicating harsh messages regarding faith and of how the lack thereof can lead to dramatic downfall.

The Violent Bear it Away

Flannery O'Connor's second novel takes its title from Matthew 11:12, which says, "From the days of John the Baptist until now, the Kingdom of Heaven suffereth violence, and the violent bear it away". Perhaps at no other time in O'Connor's career did she better realize her vision of expressing theological lessons to an intended pagan audience. The Violent Bear it Away is the story of fourteen-year-old Francis Tarwater and of his intense struggle to shed his great uncle's extremist teachings.

Francis Tarwater, or simply "Tarwater," as he prefers to be called, is a young boy, orphaned at birth (his parents have perished in a car accident). As an infant, he is kidnapped by his great uncle, a profound fundamentalist, certain that he has been called by God to be a prophet and that the same is expected of his nephew: "The old man...had raised the boy to expect the Lord's call himself and to be prepared for the day he would hear it. He had schooled him in the evils that befall prophets; in those that come from the world...and those that come from the Lord and burn the prophet clean" (5). Young Tarwater is brought up in this manner until he is fourteen, at which time his great uncle passes away.

However, just as he begins to dig his great-uncle's grave, a stranger arrives on the scene and begins to argue with him, scrutinizing his faith at the roots, calling into

question his sanity, as well as that of his great uncle, and finally, his own. Describing this new character, O'Connor writes, "He began to feel that he was only just now meeting himself, as if as long as his uncle had lived, he had been deprived of his acquaintance" (35). However, this *stranger* isn't actually human at all; in my opinion this new voice is young Tarwater's inner conscience, questioning and expressing the thoughts that he has never before had the freedom to think.

However, at least one other interpretation exists, and this is that the new character is none over than the Devil himself. From my reading, however, I am inclined to disagree with this, for I feel that, though this new character is certainly tempting Tarwater to perform evil in ways that he has never before considered, I feel that this is the result of Tarwater's previous lack of independence, and that he is only now able to rebel, without the constant control of his great-uncle. Tarwater has spent his first fourteen years with his mind fully formed by the dictations of the old man; however, it takes only a few moments for his conscience to push him towards doubting these beliefs.

One of the stranger's primary complaints regarding his great uncle is his seemingly narrow focus: "He was a one-notion man. Jesus. Jesus this and Jesus that" (39). Discussing this with his conscience, Tarwater recognizes how little of the world he has actually experienced. He is entirely ignorant of modern technology, and he has no clue what is going on in the world outside his great uncle's farm. The sudden realization of his seclusion from the outside world leads him to doubt the authenticity of his great uncle's teachings, and he decides to venture out into the world, to see things for himself, and to visit his only living relative, the schoolteacher his great uncle detests. With this thought in mind, Tarwater abandons the grave he is digging, burns his great uncle's house

down, believing that his corpse is still sitting at the breakfast table inside, and begins the long walk to see his uncle, the schoolteacher named Rayber.

Tarwater eventually hitches a ride with a salesman named Meeks, and waits outside the schoolteacher's home until the sun rises. O'Connor writes, "The boy had sense enough to know that he had been betrayed by the schoolteacher and he did not mean to go to his house until daylight, when he could see behind and before him" (78). When it is light outside, Tarwater musters up the courage to knock on his uncle's door. The two are equally shocked to be finally seeing one another, though it appears that Tarwater's attempted disassociation of his great uncle mirrors that of the schoolteacher. When Tarwater tells the schoolteacher that the old man is dead and has been cremated, the schoolteacher seems delighted: "It's a perfect irony, a perfect irony that you should have taken care of the matter in that way. He got what he deserved...Everything he touched, he warped" (90). From here on, the schoolteacher feels it is his duty to undo the teachings ingrained into his nephew.

However, erasing the impact made in the thinking of young Tarwater is an entirely futile endeavor. O'Connor writes, "He only knew, with a certainty sunk in despair, that he was expected to baptize the child he saw and begin the life his great-uncle had prepared him for. He knew that he was called to be a prophet and that the ways of his prophecy would not be remarkable" (91). The child to which this passage refers is the schoolteacher's son, a mentally handicapped five-year-old named Bishop whom Tarwater's great uncle felt it was his duty to baptize, a responsibility he handed down in death to his nephew.

Due to Tarwater's stubbornness, or perhaps his steadfastness of faith (depending upon which side you wish to take), it is not long before the schoolteacher's patience begins to run thin with his new pupil. While Rayber's enthusiasm withers with his nephew, it is apparent that he recognizes the source of his frustration: "It was apparent from everything he did and said exactly who had brought him up" (100). However, while the schoolteacher is having difficulty wrestling the seeds of Tarwater's upbringing from his consciousness, it is soon revealed that Tarwater is attempting to do the same.

It is here that the theme of free will arises. In this story, it is called into question whether motivations indeed outweigh actions. Throughout the novel, Tarwater is constantly reminding those around him *I don't talk, I act*, yet all of his actions are in direct response to the teachings of his great uncle, either in concordance with them, or in absolute rebellion. In Tarwater, we have a character taught from birth to wait patiently for the Lord's call and not to let anything stand in the way; however, as soon as his great uncle passes away, the boy seems to find every manner imaginable with which to disobey this commandment. If one is to abandon doctrine at the first opportunity, then was there any point in such strict instruction in the first place? I feel that this is a key message in The Violent Bear it Away, as we watch a boy, a fourteen-year-old boy at that, struggle with the idea that his life may or may not have divine intentions. Nevertheless, as a Catholic, O'Connor did not believe in predestination, so this point becomes even more complex when considered that she would have felt that this struggle finds its genesis in Tarwater's raising, not in his God. With this in mind, Old Mason Tarwater's teachings of predestination can be viewed as a misguided distraction that is leading his nephew away from God. In short, Old Tarwater has attempted to deaden his nephew's free will, and

O'Connor is using this instruction to provoke young Tarwater to run away and sin, effectively proving that free will does exist after all.

In wrestling with these ideas, Tarwater sneaks out of the schoolteacher's house at night in order to have unsupervised contact with the outside world. One scene finds Rayber realizing what his nephew has been doing, and so he follows him through the streets, not resting until Tarwater finally stops to look at something, though the schoolteacher is disappointed to find that his nephew is only looking into the window of a bakery: "The place was only a bakery. The window was empty except for a loaf of bread pushed to the side that must have been overlooked when the shelf was cleaned for the night" (122). Though the bread may have seemed insignificant to the schoolteacher at the time, this loaf of bread echoes the great uncle's teachings about the bread of life and foreshadows Tarwater's later insatiable hunger for religious experience.

However, Rayber, in addition to being a relentless learner, is also extremely cynical in regards to all things that cannot be proven. For example, when he follows his nephew to a church service, he is appalled by a twelve-year-old's testimony regarding how she has served the Lord and how others can do the same: "Simply by the sight of her he could tell that she was not a fraud, that she was only exploited" (129).

In the same way, Rayber feels that Tarwater's innocence has been stolen and exploited by his great uncle, and though he hopes to undo this, he is also fearful that Tarwater plans to do the same to Bishop. In Rayber's mind, this must be prevented at all costs. At one point, when Rayber realizes that Tarwater has attempted to baptize Bishop, he manages to prevent it, and it is here that the reader realizes just how important Rayber feels it is to protect his son. O'Connor writes:

> He felt that he had just saved the boy from committing some enormous indignity. He saw it all now. The old man had transferred his fixation to the boy....He saw no way of curing him except perhaps through some shock, some sudden concrete confrontation with the futility, the ridiculous absurdity of performing the empty rite (146).

However, it seems that Tarwater is constantly compelled to baptize the young boy. Without seeming to realize it, several times in the novel (basically anytime that water is present), Tarwater finds himself walking towards the young boy, with the result being an attempt to dunk him in the water. Nevertheless, Tarwater insists that he intends to do no such thing, even expressing to his uncle that the only reason he observed the church service was "to spit on it" (136). However, as much as he tries to lose his faith, Tarwater is wholly unable to convince himself of the falsity of his great uncle's teachings; he is unable to alter his thinking into the mechanical mold of the schoolteacher.

All the while, the *stranger* engages in countless discussions with Tarwater, probing his thoughts in an attempt to draw to light whether or not there is indeed a plan laid out for him by God. Once, after another failed try at baptizing Bishop, the voice says to him, "Listen, you have to quit confusing madness with a mission. You can't spend your life fooling yourself this way" (165). For Tarwater, though he feels strongly that he has been fooled, it is his most innate struggle to discern who has been fooling him: his great uncle, his uncle, or himself.

In my readings of O'Connor, I feel that no scene better utilizes the grotesque than that of Bishop's baptism. This scene finds young Tarwater fighting all the voices in his head at once, conquering the burden of all his conflicting teachings by giving in to them all simultaneously.

In a sense, Tarwater's baptism of Bishop is the end to which all of The Violent Bear it Away is bent. Rayber, with his endless search for knowledge has forsaken the impulse of love, especially that of his son, of whom he dependably admonishes Tarwater, "Don't mind him" (92), not to mention his failed attempt to drown the boy some time before. Regarding Rayber, Desmond writes that he has "attempted to remake himself according to his own rational model; he is ruthlessly driven to exclude any hint of mystery in being or possible transcendence" (108). However, Rayber eventually pays the penalty for his cold sentiments with his son's death. Even after it is revealed that Bishop is dead, Rayber still seems calculating and numb: "He stood waiting for the raging pain, the intolerable hurt that was his due, to begin, so that he could ignore it, but he continued to feel nothing. He stood light-headed at the window and it was not until he realized there would be no pain that he collapsed" (203).

However, the numbness exhibited in Rayber following Bishop's death is an impossible outcome for Tarwater. The drowning of the young boy was Tarwater's attempt to destroy the burden of his prophecy, to render him unfit for God's work. However, this intention is confounded as he speaks the words of baptism, again bringing the Spirit into what he hoped would be a disqualifying, heinous action. Instead, Tarwater has succeeded in sending the boy to heaven. Much like Harry Ashfield, Bishop is mentally incapable of choosing his own baptism, and is sent to heaven at the hands of Tarwater. Though this scene is horrifying when taken at face value, perhaps Rayber's ambivalence is closer to O'Connor's desired effect. It is certainly terrible to imagine a fourteen year-old murdering a mentally handicapped five year-old boy; however, it is

certain that Bishop will be spending an eternity in a better place, and perhaps O'Connor intended for her readers to realize this before expressing unbridled pity.

Failing again, Tarwater tries once more to flee from the eyes of God, returning to Powderhead and his great uncle's farm. However, he is sexually victimized by an older man on his way home, this assault causing him to recognize fully the horrors of evil, forcing him to come to terms with his hideous act of drowning Bishop: "His scorched eyes no longer looked hollow or as if they were meant only to guide him forward. They looked as if, touched with a coal like the lips of the prophet, they would never be used for ordinary sights again" (233). The story closes with Tarwater, gazing with the eyes of a prophet, witnessing a vision of the resurrected, one of which is his great uncle, feasting upon fishes and loaves of bread.

With this final scene, Tarwater recognizes that it is his destiny to fill his great uncle's shoes and become the prophet he hoped for him to be: "He threw himself to the ground and with his face against the dirt of the grave, he heard the command. GO WARN THE CHILDREN OF GOD OF THE TERRIBLE SPEED OF MERCY. The words were as silent as seeds opening one at a time in his blood" (242). At the story's close, after a week of searching, filled with wandering and anger, murder and hiding, Tarwater will begin to live a life focused firmly upon God. In the eyes of his community, he will certainly be deemed as crazy as was his great uncle; however, in the eyes of young Tarwater, there is no other way to live.

Everything that Rises Must Converge

Flannery O'Connor's second volume of short stories, Everything that Rises Must Converge, is again marked by the heat the fills her previous writings. Published in 1965, this collection includes the short story that I feel best exemplifies the Christian element of O'Connor's writing. "Revelation" reverberates with biblical imagery, dealing with the dramatic spiritual transformation of a seemingly incorrigible spirit.

"Revelation" is the story of Mrs. Turpin, a large, proud woman whose time spent in the doctor's office leads to her questioning herself in ways she never before has. One of the Bible's most prominent teachings is "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged" (Matthew 7:1). However, it is made obvious throughout the story that this is a commandment to which Mrs. Turpin does not adhere. In the story's opening paragraph, Mrs. Turpin is described: "Her little bright black eyes took in all the patients as she sized up the seating situation" (488). Just as Mrs. Turpin freely *sizes up* the seating positions of those in the waiting room, she is also quite obsessed with social positions, constantly assessing the often inferior social standings of those around her. O'Connor writes of her, "Sometimes at night when she couldn't go to sleep, Mrs. Turpin would occupy herself with the question of who she would have chosen to be if she couldn't have been herself" (491). Mrs. Turpin is white, possessing of land and a home. Judging from her thoughts and prayers, it is painfully obvious that she could never happily occupy any other social level. Sitting in the waiting room, Mrs. Turpin examines the appearances and mannerisms of the patients, each time concluding that she is more fortunate than the

others. She has better skin than the fat girl, better clothes than the child and the "thin, leathery woman," and certainly better manners than the redheaded, gum-chewing woman.

However, Mrs. Turpin does feel a kinship with one woman in the waiting room, first referred to as the "stylish lady," later as the "pleasant lady." Nevertheless, it is quite apparent that she is granted these monikers because she consistently tells Mrs. Turpin exactly what she wants to hear. When Mrs. Turpin has difficulty squeezing herself into a chair, the lady is quick to tell her that she is not fat and that she has "such a good disposition" (490). Mrs. Turpin feels that the lady understands her simply because she never questions her, even as she expresses her questionable opinions regarding farm management and the proper place for African Americans. As Dorothy Wells notes, "Mrs. Turpin's contributions to the dialogue are obviously well rehearsed. The door to her mind has long ago swung shut, and no approach short of violence can lead to any revision of her stubbornly held views" (Walters 109).

On the other hand, the lady's daughter responds to Mrs. Turpin in a manner entirely the opposite. Instead of responding favorably like her mother, Mary Grace scowls a bit more forcefully with each politically incorrect and seemingly accepted (by the others in the waiting room) statement. Mary Grace, a student at Wellesley, initially does her best to ignore Mrs. Turpin by burying her face in a textbook, yet is never completely able to tune out the conversation. Matters grow worse after Claud and her mother join in, jokingly discussing miscegenation, concluding that it will only bring about "white-faced niggers" (496), a statement that brings a chorus of laughter from the others in the waiting room. O'Connor is sure to note that the girl does not find humor in any of the day's discussion. The Bible teaches that "A soft answer turns away wrath, but

a harsh word stirs up anger" (Proverbs 15:1). In the case of Mary Grace, the only way she can respond softly to Mrs. Turpin's pontifications is to greet them with total silence. However, she can only maintain this practice for a short time.

The pleasant lady is embarrassed by her daughter's lack of participation, and cites this as proof of her ungratefulness, saying, "[she] just criticizes and complains all day long" (499). Mrs. Turpin responds to this condemnation by loudly declaring the gratitude she feels each day: "If it's one thing I am, it's grateful. When I think who all I could have been besides myself...I just feel like shouting, 'Thank you Jesus, for making everything the way it is!'" (499). With this, Mary Grace explodes, flinging her book at Mrs. Turpin, striking her in the face, and telling her, "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog" (500).

Even while giving thanks to Jesus, Mrs. Turpin's proclamations contain a great deal more pride than gratitude. In fact, her prayer bears a striking resemblance to the Pharisee's prayer, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector" (Luke 18:11). In telling this story, Jesus concludes by saying, "...all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted" (18:14). Hearing Mrs. Turpin's prayer in this light would seem to indicate that God would not receive her proclamation as an expression of humble gratitude but as an exaltation of herself. However, from the moment that Mary Grace snaps, Mrs. Turpin starts on her way to a powerful, humbling experience.

It is well within the realms of reason to consider that O'Connor may have written her version of "Revelation" with a certain verse from its biblical namesake in mind. In the third chapter of Revelation, verse 17 states, "You say, 'I am rich, I have prospered,

and I need nothing.' You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked." This statement can effectively summarize Mrs. Turpin's state of mind throughout the first portion of this story. The verse was to be sent as part of a warning from God to a church in Laodicea, a church that desperately needed to turn from its worldly ways. In the same manner, Mrs. Turpin receives a powerful message that causes her to reevaluate her relationships with and judgments of others. Even after Mary Grace is carried off in an ambulance, Mrs. Turpin is unable to ignore the evaluation that has been made of her. The events in the doctor's office bring about a visible change in Mrs. Turpin. She abandons her "good disposition" and becomes strangely glum, even refusing her doctor's attempts to help her. As David Eggenschwiler "Whereas she once complained about 'buttering up niggers,' she now becomes openly angry at her ingratiating workers, and her previous irritation with white trash becomes hatred" (43).

The next day she seeks solace from the farmhands, and they shower her with compliments, commenting on her beauty and personality. However, as Janet Dunleavy argues, "The insincerity of their exaggerated response digusts her, even though it is but a mirror of her own insincere expressions of friendship" (200). If Mary Grace's attack reveals to Mrs. Turpin the revelation that she was in fact vulnerable to the judgments of others, the dutiful responses of the black laborers reveal the wall that exists between classes, a wall that ideologies such as Mrs. Turpin's help to maintain. A day earlier, flattery from the laborers' would have proven satisfactory, even uplifting, yet now she discounts it with disgust. Mrs. Turpin realizes that the farm workers, unlike Mary Grace, are merely saying what they are expected to say. O'Connor writes, "Mrs. Turpin knew just exactly how much Negro flattery was worth and it added to her rage" (505). Only

yesterday, a woman in a hospital waiting room agreeing with her every word was enough for Mrs. Turpin to think of her as "pleasant" and "stylish." Today, however, Mrs. Turpin is no longer in search of flattery and worldly esteem, she instead longs for the truth: for a direct answer from God.

Mrs. Turpin walks to the pig parlor and begins angrily to pose questions to the sky, asking why she was singled out for such a judgment. Still firmly holding to her values regarding social class, Mrs. Turpin says, "There was plenty of trash there. It didn't have to be me" (507). She threatens God that she will make herself behave like white trash but is quick to point out that this will do nothing to dissolve class, for there will still be a bottom and a top. Exhibiting the magnitude of her indignance, Mrs. Turpin then shouts to God, "Who do you think you are?" (507). At this point, Mrs. Turpin receives her third revelation, this one coming directly from God.

Before Mrs. Turpin's eyes comes a vision of a multitude of souls marching towards heaven. Amongst this company are white trash, black people, freaks, as well as those like herself, marching in the back. O'Connor continues, "Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away" (508). The Bible says of God in the final judgement, "His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (Matthew 3:12). Judging from this description, it seems the virtues that Mrs. Turpin values so greatly are merely worthless chaff in the eyes of the Lord and that physical, earthly riches must be dissolved before one can enter heaven.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus discusses those who will enter the Kingdom of Heaven: "Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first" (10:31). Standing

beside the hog parlor, Mrs. Turpin sees a vision that solidifies the idea that reputation on this earth does not necessarily correlate with honor in heaven. Priding herself on social virtues and being thankful for good financial fortune have not been habits pleasing to God, and the vision provides Mrs. Turpin with vivid evidence of the errors of her ways. The third and final revelation that comes to Ruby Turpin is of her relative insignificance in the spiritual order. It is not until she recognizes this that she is able to discover the attribute that she has gone so long without: humility.

Also included in Everything that Rises Must Converge is "The Enduring Chill." Here, O'Connor remarks on the tragedy of human life, with all of our morbid flailings and spiritual ruminations. When I first read O'Connor's description of Asbury, lying delirious in bed, suffering from undulant fever, I considered this principal character to be a reflection of the writer's own life, suffering in seclusion from lupus, devoting her energy to creating the works upon which her reputation rests. However, in the case of Asbury, it appears that his desire to be an artist is not quite matched by his environment, nor his aptitude.

At the moment the reader is introduced to Asbury, it seems that he has been granted a power of perception that sets him apart from his surroundings. Casting his eyes upon an ordinary gray sky, he is described as follows: "Asbury felt that he was about to witness a majestic transformation, that the flat rods might at any moment turn into the mounting turrets of some exotic temple for a god he didn't know. The illusion lasted only a moment before his attention was drawn back to his mother" (357). With this quote, Asbury is revealed as a character who desperately longs to seek out the wonder in all of creation only to be drawn back to the mundane responsibilities all about him.

However, the remainder of the story develops Asbury's creative and personal shortcomings, as it is eventually revealed that he is hardly the visionary his introduction would lead the reader to believe. By contrast, Asbury is another example of O'Connor creating a character whose lack of a personal relationship with God is echoed by personal turmoil.

Just as Asbury's mother stands in the way of his fully digesting the physical world, it is demonstrated that the physical world also detracts from his understanding of the spiritual realm. The irony is that while Asbury constantly claims to be physically ill, he also instructs all who will listen that no doctor can do him any good, for his problems are spiritual in nature. Asbury's spiritual foil is Goetz, a man who holds no regard for his friend's inner turmoil, instead admonishing Asbury that "Salvation is the destruction of a simple prejudice, and no one is saved" (360). To this assertion, the priest in the room remarks, "There is a real probability of the New Man, assisted, of course, by the Third Person of the Trinity" (360), referring to the Holy Spirit which is notably absent from Asbury's life, and also setting his rhetoric apart from the intellectuals whose verbal bouts are sprinkled throughout this story.

Dialogue such as this does no good for Asbury, who sinks further into depression and eventually resigns himself to lying in bed, waiting to die. Asbury's mother fears that he is about to have a nervous breakdown, due to his constant expressions that it is pointless for any doctor to try to cure his ailments physically. In light of all this, perhaps O'Connor best expresses her feelings regarding the intellectual discussion of religion and its effect on Asbury in saying, "When people think they are smart—even when they are smart—there is nothing anybody else can say to make them see straight" (361).

Following this line of thought, and discussing the perils of too much education when enforced upon the otherwise sane mind, O'Connor writes, "Their father had gone to a one-room schoolhouse through the eight grade and he could do anything" (361). Sometimes a strong influence of education can have a detrimental effect upon one's practical skills; in the case of Asbury, his intellectual prowess, combined with his artistic leanings, may have been enough to push him across the barrier of mental unrest.

In his attempts to grapple with the Creator, it should also be noted just to what extent Asbury has struggled to create: "He had destroyed everything else he had ever written—his two lifeless novels, his half-dozen stationary plays, his prosy poems, his sketchy short stories..." (365). The only writing left intact is a letter addressed to his mother, to be read only after his death. In regards to the letter, Asbury feels that even his mother will not understand the significance of it. From this, it is clearly expressed that Asbury feels a dissatisfaction for both his earthly and heavenly creators, leading to his requests to be left alone in his room with the blinds closed, rendering him with no view of the farm outside.

Asbury's keeping himself from the ways of the farm is interesting. From my reading, this reinforces his rejection of the practical life in favor of chasing the creative muse and intellectual rants that are driving him insane. Asbury is unable to communicate with his mother or the black farmhands, for he is certain they do not understand him, and this frustration is manifested in his inability to produce writings, rendering him unable to serve the one god in which he has placed all his faith: Art. Asbury has created his own monastery within his mind, causing himself to pray at the altar of writing, waiting for an answer that never comes. Realizing the futility of his work, Asbury welcomes an end to

his life: "Death was coming to him legitimately, as a justification, as a gift from life" (370). That is why when the doctor comes to him, Asbury wants no part of his treatment, for he sees death as a release from the life he feels is punishment. Asbury has chosen to accept Goetz's statement that there is no salvation, and for the god that he has chosen to worship, there will not be. Whether or not Asbury is actually coming down with undulant fever is debatable, however, it is my belief that if Asbury were not actually suffering from any *real* sickness, he would simply make one up. This is echoed by Mary George who tells her mother after the doctor announces that Asbury has undulant fever, "You've got to face the facts: Asbury can't write so he gets sick. He's going to be an invalid instead of an artist" (373). However, being told that he is actually dying causes Asbury to believe that he is finally receiving his just reward for his life of service to Art. With this in mind, Asbury asks to see a priest.

The scene that follows is exemplary of the struggle at hand. Asbury is trying to reconcile the physical world with the spiritual world, while at the same time believing that his sole purpose for life is to create art that he has so far been unable to produce. Asbury feels that the priest is surely an intelligent man, in opposition to the workers of the earth with whom Asbury lives, those he sees as feeble minded. When the priest does not recognize the name of James Joyce (certainly a writer whose work focused upon spiritual questionings from time to time), Asbury turns the subject to the existence of God, hoping to receive a concrete answer for abstract questions. The frustration of the scene is illustrated in the shouting of the characters, one a learned priest, deaf in one ear, blind in one eye, who can't quite get a firm grasp upon what he is being asked to explain,

the other a bed-ridden struggling artist who has given up on there ever being a reason for his existence.

With Asbury, we have a character who has substituted a worship of art for a worship of the Heavenly Father. As a writer, O'Connor clearly understood the struggle that is intrinsically linked with the desire to create. However, Asbury's idolatrous relationship with writing has caused him to collapse when art has failed to demonstrate itself in his work. With so many of O'Connor's writings dealing with relationships with God, "The Enduring Chill" is unique in that its principal character labors under immense pain as a result of his unfulfilling worship of an idol—the unfaithful deity of writing fiction.

When Flannery O'Connor wrote her final story, she chose not to draft an entirely original work. Instead, "Judgment Day" is a revision of the earliest fiction we have from O'Connor, "The Geranium," the first story in her Master's Thesis. "Judgment Day" is a dramatic reworking of the earlier story, for though it casts similar characters in similar situations, the insight one can gain from the latter story is so much greater; O'Connor's writing style had developed immensely by this time, causing the characters to take on much more depth. Both stories describe an older white man who goes to live with his daughter in New York city, after spending a lifetime in the South, accustomed to the social advantages that accompanied being white. After a short time, it becomes apparent that the man has great difficulty adjusting to city life, especially the idea of living and working alongside black people, whom they have spent their entire lives viewing as subordinate. Around this skeleton of a plot, O'Connor expanded her initial story to include close descriptions of the old white man's way of thought, as well as views of

spirituality. To consider that O'Connor's original story was written with all these expansions in mind not only testifies to the degree to which O'Connor's writing style developed over time but also that the Christian message of her work was so important to her that she felt it necessary to revisit her first story in order to cast it within this framework. At the time of her death, "Judgment Day" represented how O'Connor hoped for her work to remembered.

Though "The Geranium" is an enjoyable story, Old Dudley, the story's tragic protagonist is hardly able to draw a sincere, sympathetic response from the common reader who perceives him merely as a racist who has refused to adjust to the times. This perception is most evident when Old Dudley explodes at the thought of a black man moving into an apartment next door to his daughters, saying, "You ain't been raised to live tight with niggers that think they're just as good as you..." (9). This harshly racist philosophy is magnified when viewed against the closing of the story, which finds Old Dudley struggling to walk down the staircase of the apartment, falling over, and being helped by the same black man that had provoked his anger a few days before.

When Old Dudley falls down the staircase, he has slipped into a daydream and believes he is walking around the woods, hunting. When the black man sees this, he asks him, "What are you hunting, old-timer?" (12) This bothers Old Dudley a great deal, for he has lived a life never answering to or being helped by blacks that were not his hired hands (though this story is set after the Civil War, Old Dudley has maintained the practice of hiring black farm workers throughout his time in the south). This act of kindness is too much for the white man to handle, and the story ends with Old Dudley crying and looking out the window, hoping to see the geranium that has been in the

window across the street. Old Dudley's most overwhelming emotion is that of simply wanting to go home: "He was trapped in this place where niggers could call you 'old-timer'. He wouldn't be trapped. He wouldn't be" (13).

This hopeless homesickness is further developed in the scene in which Dudley is told that the geranium has fallen six stories to the ground. The man with the geranium does not realize that Dudley's attention has been focused on the flower. Instead, he is perplexed and angry as to why the old man has been staring into his window everyday. The man says, "I seen you before, I seen you settin' in that old chair every day, starin' out the window, looking in my apartment. What I do in my apartment is my business, see? I don't like people looking at what I do....I only tell people once" (14). This final statement represents the ultimate expression of unfriendliness, that Old Dudley is living in an environment in which he is now not even welcome to look out from his own apartment window.

The plot of "Judgment Day" runs a fairly close parallel to that of "The Geranium." In this story, the role of Old Dudley is filled by a man named Tanner. However, in this story the racism is not limited to the old man, for it is revealed that he has decided to live in New York at his daughter's urgings, after she finds that he has been living with a black man, a former slave named Coleman. Finding the two of them asleep in the same house prompts the daughter to say, "If you don't have any pride I have and I know my duty and I was raised to do it" (534). The daughter feels that her father's residing with a black man shows a lack of self-respect, and her invitation for him to live with her is the result of her shame at her father's apparent disintegration.

Likewise, the scene of the old white man collapsing upon the stairwell is reprised in "Judgment Day." In this case, Tanner is attempting to leave the apartment building and catch a train back home, in order to be buried at his home in the South, for he has overheard his daughter say that she will bury him in New York. However, one key difference in this story is that the old man does not spend his days staring at a flower from his window; instead, his attention is focused on the black neighbor and his white wife. O'Connor writes, "Every time he heard a noise on the stairs he went to the door and looked out, but the Negro did not return until late in the afternoon" (545). In my opinion, this detail of objectifying the black man as a curiosity renders the scene on the stairwell even more poignant.

The scene of Tanner's first meeting with the black actor in the stairway is very perplexing, for it finds the old man attempting to strike up a kinship with the black man. Contrary to the description in "The Geranium," it seems that in this telling of the story, Tanner is actually hoping to make friends with the black man. However, Tanner simply does not know where to begin. For instance, Tanner refers to the black man as *preacher*, for he believes that most black men are; this is an obvious example of a racial stereotype which Tanner has never questioned, and as a result, he pays a heavy price.

Referring to the black man as a preacher draws a harsh response. The man shouts, "I'm not no preacher! I'm not even no Christian. I don't believe that crap. There ain't no Jesus and there ain't no God" (545). This discussion certainly adds a Christian detail to the story, for the idea that a man, black or white, would respond with such intensity to being called a preacher is an entirely foreign idea to Tanner. In short, the Christianity that the black man so strongly rejects is strongly tied to the South that Tanner

thinks of as home. This altercation leaves Tanner with a stroke, and he is not the same for the remainder of the story. O'Connor said time and time again that she felt it necessary to shock unbelievers into positions in which they would be more likely to accept new positions. With Tanner, who has spent a lifetime steadfastly set in his ways, a black man's harsh denial of being a preacher, and of holding any religious beliefs at all, is the shock that he needs in order to be prepared for a dramatic spiritual change.

In addition to religion, another element that is fleshed out here is the idea of social progress throughout history. Desmond writes:

> The New York world of Tanner's daughter is one ostensibly marked by social progress, at least to the extent that a relative equality exists between whites and Negroes. But underlying this superficial advance is the deeper fact of spiritual alienation, signified by the estrangement from others...the people of each race guardedly minding their own business (78).

In the black man's denying any kind of relationship with God, he not only renounces the Christian faith but also emphasizes a separation from common stereotypes.

This theme of Christianity is echoed in Tanner's second and final attempt to descend the stairway in order to reach home. This scene is described as follows: "He pushed one foot forward and did not fall and his confidence returned. 'The Lord is my shepherd,' he muttered, 'I shall not want'" (548). This reference to the 23rd Psalm is timely placed, for it finds Tanner reciting the comforting passage to himself just before he is to begin his journey home. The fact that Tanner chooses to *mutter* the Psalm is also crucial, for it brings to mind the image of an old, proud man, quoting the Bible in a sincere whisper that only he can hear, much like Gabriel in "Wildcat", a story actually written in the same year as "The Geranium". Also to be considered are the similarities between Tanner and the grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find", for in both cases,

horrible circumstances bring about a humbling in a stubborn, elderly character, that in turn, provides an opportunity for redemption.

This manner of quoting the Bible stands in contrast to a scene a few pages earlier, when Tanner says to his daughter, "The Judgment is coming. The sheep'll be separated from the goats...Them that honored their father and their mother from them that cursed them..." (541). Here, Tanner is primarily using the Bible to reprimand her, and this only brings her resentment. However, on the stairwell, Tanner is acknowledging his faith in the form of a prayer. With these words being said under his breath, Tanner tumbles to the bottom of the stairs, again unable to escape back to the south.

It can be reasoned that Tanner would not have fallen if he hadn't been trying to descend the stairwell so soon after having a stroke, and that he wouldn't have had the stroke if he hadn't expressed his stubborn stereotypes to the actor. The last words that Tanner hears are those of the black man who has found his mangled body along the steps. The man, ironically the same one who brought about Tanner's stroke earlier in the story, is mocking him, saying, "Ain't no judgment day, old man. Cept this. Maybe this here judgment day for you" (549). The reader is uncertain what action the black man takes on Tanner. However, one thing that is for certain is that the man has provided him no aid, instead choosing simply to mock Tanner's beliefs—beliefs Tanner holds with a newfound faith that, without knowing it, the actor has inspired. With this detail, the actor functions in a similar manner as Manley Pointer, for his cruelty has lead to a new spiritual integrity in his victim.

The old man's daughter finds his corpse an hour after he dies. It is interesting to note that the daughter chooses to bury Tanner in New York, though after numerous

sleepless nights, she digs up the body so it can be buried again in Corinth, Mississippi. I feel that this detail again enhances O'Connor's final revision of the story. Though the old man doesn't actually die in "The Geranium," it is apparent that he is experiencing certain emotional demise. In "Judgment Day," however, the inclusion of the daughter's troubles with burying her father in New York bring to mind concrete themes of displacement, as well as the idea that a part of the daughter still identifies the South as being her home. More importantly to O'Connor's Christian vision, however, is that Tanner's being exhumed can be considered another form of resurrection, for he is being taken away from the city certainly foreign to him to be placed back where he belongs. Much like the murdered grandmother staring upwards with a clear view of heaven, I feel that this exhumation is a final representation of Tanner's salvation, occurring at the close of his life, but not too late to grant him an eternity in heaven.

Conclusion

Drawing an uplifting religious message from the writings of Flannery O'Connor is not an act that always takes place without struggle. Instead, one must often dig deeply into the text in order to discern the meaning O'Connor originally intended. Much like the Bible itself, these stories take on greater significance after repeated readings, and in the case of O'Connor's work, the results are often increasingly disturbing and disorienting. Nevertheless, through my readings of O'Connor's body of work, I feel that her intended Christian message is evident throughout her writings. Even after repeated readings, I am still unable to complete one of her stories without registering an emotional response, as

well as rethinking my standard beliefs regarding the Bible. From O'Connor's own words discussing her writing, it is quite apparent that she hoped for her work to convey a Christian message. From my studies of her work, as well as those scholars who discuss it, I feel that Flannery O'Connor has succeeded in constructing a world in which salvation is a tough road to travel; however, this pathway stands as a haven by which to avoid an environment hosting much greater perils. In short, the Christianity advocated by O'Connor is both pious and intense, promising great reward in the midst of enveloping sorrow, while leaving no room for spiritual complacency.

The chief complaint regarding O'Connor's work is that her depictions of the world as violent and grotesque oftentimes obscure a vision intended to lead readers to divinity. Nevertheless, repeated readings do little to dull the harsh effect of O'Connor's literary world. The more one comes into contact with these scenes, the more one recognizes the familiarity of them, that the horrors of these stories aren't entirely foreign to the world we inhabit. In a sense, O'Connor's writing prepares Christians for the most horrendous stumbling blocks believers can face, accomplishing this by employing distorted caricatures representing the most appalling facets of human nature—the everyday sins that lead to close-mindedness, in turn perpetuating philosophical evils that lead to racism and unfairly judging others, and finally, acts of violence and betrayal. Perhaps what O'Connor best understood is that those sins commonly perceived as *large* are often brought about by *smaller sins* that have been tolerated too long. If O'Connor's morality tales simply consisted of repetitious lessons of *don't do this*, then her message would be understood much more clearly, though certainly with less dramatic impact upon the reader. However, O'Connor's style of writing, problematic as it may seem to some,

is one of the most unique of modern literature, and as a result, the lessons of her work, when fully uncovered, are impossible to forget.

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