

A Grotesque But Realistic World

---On Flannery O'Connor's Life and Literary Charms

Synopsis

Flannery O'Connor is open to various interpretations. There has been much critical analysis written about her short stories and novels. Some of it focuses on her place as a woman writer in a Southern literary scene occupied predominantly by men; some deals with her religious symbolism; some concerns with the feministic voice in her fiction; still others with O'Connor as a storyteller whose chief purpose was to entertain the reader with comic and strange twists of plot.

Though O'Connor's life is short and her literary creations as well as her audience are small in amount, she still deserves a place in American Literature with her successful characterizations and successful blending of Christianity and grotesqueness into her fiction. *The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor* (1971), a collection of all her short stories, won the Nation Book Award in 1971. *The Habit of Being* (1979), a volume of O'Connor's collected letters, won the Board Award of the National Critic's Circle in 1980. Among her many other prizes, O'Connor received a Kenyon Review Fellowship for fiction in 1953; an O'Henry award second prize for her short story "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" in 1954 and another in 1955 for "A Circle of Fire"; a grant from the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1957; first prize O'Henry awards for "Greenleaf" in 1957, for "Everything That Rises Must Converge" in 1963, and for "Revelation" in 1965; and a Ford Foundation grant in 1959. All these and the early inclusion of her works in the library of America (lots of anthologies has included "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" or "Good Country People", or both) firmly established her position in American Literature. And her short stories are still widely respected today as models of the well-made story. Her representations still hold value for today's audience because many countries around the world have been obsessed with the same social problems caused by fanatic religious groups and cults (which are well presented in O'Connor's works).

This thesis focuses mainly on the grotesque aspects of Flannery O'Connor's fictional works, attempting to combine her religious faith with her writing styles with the aim of working out the puzzle how O'Connor could succeed in building grotesquerie and Christianity into her works.

The first chapter is a brief summary and overview of Flannery O'Connor's short but brilliant life and small yet impressive bulk of works. As Mary Flannery O'Connor, she was born to a Catholic family in a prominently Protestant area in the Christ-haunted Georgia. The first half of her life was the pilgrimage toward literary success, while the later half was the prime period of literary production afflicted with *lupus*, a disease inherited from her father. She lived a short life of 39 years, leaving a

legacy of 31 short stories and 2 novels.

Chapter two concentrates on the grotesque characterizations of Flannery O'Connor's writings. "Physical Portraits: the Ugly Human Body" is a sum-up of O'Connor's physical portraits, looking through the ugly, gruesome aspects of her characters' physiognomy---distorted, maimed and hideous. Following this section is a categorization of O'Connor's characters into five recurrent types. "Wicked Children" is a gallery of Flannery O'Connor's children characters whom the author did not contrive to depict as virtuous but rather paint with whatever evil (sullen, ill-tempered, rude, selfish, violent, insubordinate, mean, obdurate, grim) she could see in them, either in speech, thought, or action. "Assertive Widows" introduces aggressive, energetic, and self-righteous farmwomen, who assume their dead husband's responsibilities, are self-intoxicated in their material achievements, and speak a mouthful of clichés. And "Tin Jesus" best shows O'Connor's skillful use of chilling irony, where genuine or self-styled intellectuals are not able to recognize the true reality behind apparent reality. Her characters may convince or may repulse, but they certainly will never leave anyone indifferent. "Hideously beautiful and beautifully hideous" though they are, they are nevertheless for O'Connor the true representations of realities. Human nature for O'Connor is essentially sinful, weak, and imperfect. And the remedy she prescribed is the divine assistance of God, God's Grace. Since for her, man on earth is only a lonely clown, comical in his floundering but in his efforts to recognize and accept his humility.

Chapter three attempts to explain how O'Connor combines the grotesque with her faith by examining three elements of her writings---faith, style, and themes. Compassion, mystery, and anagoges are discussed to illustrate how successfully O'Connor has assumed her dual role as Catholic and fiction writer and done justice to her faith. "Elements of Style" examines some of the techniques and idiosyncrasies that are characteristic of her writing. "Terseness" is concerned with O'Connor's language style. She could manage with apparently bare language to present a world as colorful and grotesque as any other Southern writers. And in her narration, she employed the character's point of view by which the omniscient third-person narrator takes on the particular viewpoint of the character in question while describing this or that. "Naming of characters" tries to affix some subtle meaning to O'Connor's characters, which sometimes reveal a lot about the character under discussion and which makes good still better O'Connor's writing style. "An icy quality" is an exquisite gelidity that results in part from her awareness of death. And "Elements of Themes" is devoted to some frequently recurrent themes in O'Connor's fiction, the most obvious one being the grotesque including grotesque persons, grotesque objects and situations. Also, death, violence, and the devil's voice often repeat themselves in Flannery O'Connor's writings.

Key Words: Flannery O'Connor, characterizations, the grotesque.

Flannery O'Connor: A Diagrammatic Illustration

Places	Savannah, Georgia Yaddo Artist's Colony	Milledgeville, Georgia Andalusia	University of Iowa
Influences and Relationships	Nathaniel Hawthorne Robert Giroux Sally and Robert Fitzgerald	Caroline Gordon Nathanael West Andrew Lytle Robert Lowell	William Faulkner John Hawkes Pierre Teilhard de Chardin
Literary Movements and Forms	Gospel Parables The Grotesque Apocalypse	American Romance Tradition Symbolism	(Biblical) Prophetic Tradition
Major Themes	The Demonic Mystery and Manners Catastrophe as Hierophany Kingdom of God	The Word as Revelation Sacramental View of Life The Countryside and the True Country	Fall, Redemption, and Judgment Displacement and Homecoming
Cultural and Artistic Influences	Bible-Belt Fundamentalism	Existentialism Backwoods Prophecy	Roman Catholicism
Social and Economical Influences	Southern Genteel Tradition World War II's Displaced Persons	Racial and Social Segregation Small Farm Life	Good Country Manners

“This entry was updated by John R. May (Louisiana State University) from his entry in *DIB2, American Novelists Since World War II.*”

Quoted from *The New Consciousness, 1941-1968 Concise Dictionary of American Literary Biography* (Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research Company, 1987), p. 399.

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Introduction

Flannery O'Connor's life is best summarized in Robert Fitzgerald's introduction to *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, "She was a girl who started with a gift for cartooning and satire, and found in herself a far greater gift, unique in her time and place, a marvel."¹ And that gift, of course, was story telling. She wrote two novels and thirty-one short stories and the critical response to her works has been extraordinary. "Since her death in 1964 (by 1987), eighteen books of criticism have been published, as well as three collections of essays and five bibliographical studies. In little more than three decades since her reputation began to develop in the mid 1950s, at least four hundred critical essays and reminiscences have appeared in journals."² And her *Complete Stories* won her National Book Award in 1972, a posthumous honor.

One of the principal reasons for this overwhelming response to her fiction is undoubtedly the fact that in an age of existential angst and the eclipse of traditional belief, Flannery O'Connor wrote brilliant stories that brought the issue of religious faith into clear dramatic focus. She was a devout Roman Catholic living in predominantly Protestant rural Georgia. Though her stories are far from pious---in fact, their mode is usually shocking and often bizarre, the religious issues they raise are central to her works. O'Connor's fictional world as a Catholic writer is one founded on three basic theological truths: "the Fall, the Redemption, and the Judgment." But the secular world is either unprepared or unwilling to accept that vision. The would-be existentialist prophet in *Wise Blood*, Hazel Motes, in preaching his "Church Without Christ," puts it this way: "I'm going to preach there was no Fall because there was nothing to fall from and no Redemption because there was no Fall and no Judgment because there wasn't the first two."³ "[The Catholic fiction writer] may have to resort," O'Connor believed, "to violent literary means to get his vision

¹ Robert Fitzgerald, "Introduction," *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969), vii.

² *The New Consciousness, 1941-1868*, Concise Dictionary of American literary biography (Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research Company, 1987), p. 400.

³ Flannery O'Connor, *Wise Blood* (New York: Noonday Press, 1962), p. 105.

across to a hostile audience.” And this “violent literary means” she chose was the grotesque---”grotesque with good reason,” she would acclaim---because “to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures.”⁴

A major premise of O’Connor’s thinking is that the realm of the Holy interpenetrates this world and affects it. It is the workings of this mystery that she was most concerned with demonstrating in her fiction. O’Connor herself is a Catholic born in an overwhelmingly Protestant region in the American South, a Christ-haunted area in the Southern Bible Belt. By her own explanation, the grotesquerie of her stories is directly related to her Christian perspective. This is a point that has bothered some critics and which would certainly arouse doubt in readers’ mind, who feel that a Christian view of life ought to tend toward the reconciliation of opposites, toward wholeness and affirmation, whereas the grotesque is by definition distorted, incomplete, or incongruous. And in O’Connor’s works, characters are physically or psychically abnormal, and situations are often bizarre and extreme. More often than not, O’Connor uses grotesque techniques---exaggeration, distortion, and violence---to evoke a world empty of meaning, which she saw as the condition of the modern world cut off from its roots in the Holy, in Being. The city of Taulkinham in *Wise Blood*, for instance, is as grotesque and comically reduced to such a world as one often finds in modern literature.

This paper is intended to illustrate the way Flannery O’Connor interwove Catholicism (or Christianity) into her fictional works, and the way O’Connor shouted to “the hard of hearing,” and drew large and startling figures to “the almost-blind.” The first chapter is a general introduction of Flannery O’Connor, her life and works, a prolix yet indispensable necessity. It briefly summarizes the life of Flannery O’Connor, with the aim of gaining some insight to her works through the historical background. And to give a comprehensive picture for understanding Flannery O’Connor and her works, this chapter also gives a short account of

⁴ Flannery O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969), p. 34.

Flannery O'Connor's literary creations. Chapter two is wholly devoted to the characterizations in Flannery O'Connor's fictional works. It begins with a general description of her characters' physical portraits. And the main part of this chapter is a categorization of O'Connor's characters into four types, "wicked children," "young rebels," "assertive widows," and "tin Jesus." Like all generalizations, this categorization is not to, and it should not, round up all character types present; instead, it just tries to reveal some of the recurrent and typical patterns in O'Connor's works. Chapter three aims at working out the puzzle how O'Connor could succeed in doing justice to both her literary and religious grounds through examining the elements of faith, style and themes in her writings. The first part dwells on the fundamental concepts in O'Connor's faith: compassion, mystery, and analogies. The second part mainly focuses on four aspects of her writing style: terseness, character point of view, naming of characters, and an icy quality pervasive in her writings. And in the third part, the writer of this paper first elaborates on the grotesque in Flannery O'Connor's works, by discussing grotesque persons, grotesque objects (analogical) and grotesque situations (displacement included) separately. Then the writer tries to clarify the significance of these themes like grace, facing death, devilish elements. In a word, chapter two and chapter three are the detailed discussions to indicate what O'Connor had achieved through her art, her perception of her audience. In these chapters, the commentary is often supported by examples and quotes from O'Connor's own writing, including her comments appearing in *Mystery and Manners*. And the critical approach employed is simply impressionistic and historical. The conclusion in the end is an assessment of what the writer of this paper has finished.

Chapter One Life and Works: Short and Few, but Brilliant

Fiercely loyal to her native region and to her religious beliefs, Flannery O'Connor had little patience with reviewers of her works who saw her depiction of the South as a caricature and who felt that, as a sophisticated artist, she could not possibly share or take seriously the religious preoccupations of her characters. But neither the incomprehension of critics nor a series of devastating illnesses that made the last fifteen years of her life a time of great ordeal could prevent her from preserving the integrity of her vision or from creating a body of works that, however slender in bulk, places her securely in the first rank of American fiction writers of the twentieth century. Flannery O'Connor was one of the rare successful writers in their efforts to overtly "justify the ways of God to men"⁵ since John Milton.

1.1 Flannery O'Connor's Literary Career

Mary Flannery O'Connor was born in Savannah, Georgia on March 25th, 1925 to Catholic parents Edward F. and Regina C. O'Connor, and spent her early childhood at 207 East Charlton Street. Young Flannery attended St. Vincent's Grammar School and Sacred Heart Parochial School. In 1938, her father got a position as appraiser for the Federal Housing Administration, and the family moved to Northeast Atlanta, then Milledgeville, where, three years later, Ed died from complications arising from the chronic autoimmune disease *lupus*. Later Flannery went to Georgia State College for Women (now Georgia College) and State University of Iowa, obtaining her MA degree from the latter in 1947. In 1951, after complaining of a heaviness in her typing arms, she was diagnosed with the same *lupus* that had killed her father. She went on, despite the disease, to write two novels and thirty-one short stories, winning awards and acclaim, going on speaking tours when her health permitted, while most of the time, she was confined on the family farm in Milledgeville with her mother. She died in 1964, aged 39.

⁵ John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (Major British Writers Shorter Edition, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc.: 1967), Book I, p. 225.

1.1.1 Earlier Years and Apprenticeship⁶

Born in 1925, O'Connor was known throughout childhood, up until she graduated in 1945 as "Mary Flannery," when she decided that "'Mary Flannery' didn't seem sufficiently authorial: she said it sounded like the name of an Irish washerwoman."⁷ From then on, she changed her name to just Flannery O'Connor. Flannery is most noted for her short stories, yet had great interest in cartooning and drawing throughout much of her childhood. She would paint over any cracks in the walls of her home so that her mother would not cover them up with paintings from relatives. She then went on to draw such things as murals on the walls of the student union building at the Georgia State College for Women.

The only child of the family, her father is said to be one of the first creative influences in Flannery's life, by encouraging her to write and draw. However, Flannery O'Connor's first claim to fame was when she was only five years old. A New York photographer from *the Pathe News* came to visit her, in order to film an unusual site. She had taught a chick to walk backwards on her command, and from then on, it is said that this was the first story that she would tell people. It is also noted that she would make clothes for her chickens to parade around in. Throughout Flannery's life, she carried on this love for birds, with the peacock in particular as her favorite. When she mailed a letter, she would often draw a peacock on the letter and soon it became her trademark. To her, the peafowl were much more than noisy, flower-eating nuisances; they were the "King of Birds"; their beauty was mystical and regal, even a symbol of the transfigured Christ. In "the Displaced Person," when the old priest talks to Mrs. McIntyre, a widowed farm owner who has taken in a 'strange' Polish refugee, trying to explain to Mrs. McIntyre the concept of resurrection and redemption, he points to the peacock with its tail feathers arrayed and says, "Christ will come like that."⁸ Flannery's special favor for peafowl is more

⁶ The general facts on Flannery O'Connor's life mainly come from these two books: Dorothy J. McFarland, *Flannery O'Connor*, (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co. 1976), p. 1-12; Stanley E. Hyman, *Flannery O'Connor*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1966).

⁷ Dorothy Tuck McFarland, *Flannery O'Connor*, p. 6.

⁸ Flannery O'Connor, *The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1986), p. 226.

than once mentioned by critics who tried to link this eccentricity with some of the Grotesque aspects of her stories.

From 1938 to 1942, O'Connor attended Peabody High School in Milledgeville, and wrote and drew cartoons for the school newspaper. In 1942, she entered Georgia State College for Women, only one block from her home, and became art editor of the college newspaper and editor of *the Campus Literary Quarterly*. Majoring in English and sociology, she earned her BA degree in 1945. It was during this period that she dropped her first name and began signing her work Flannery O'Connor. From 1945 to 1948, she did postgraduate work at the famous Iowa Writers' Workshop, where she undertook a formal course of reading that introduced her to the work of modern writers such as James Joyce, Kafka, and her fellow Southerner William Faulkner. Two of her favorite writers were Gogol, from whom she learned how effectively underlying religious themes could be treated with grotesquely comic characters, and Hawthorne. Among her reading list were also Allen Tate, Tate's wife Caroline Gordon, Robert Penn Warren and T. S. Eliot. Her trial writing was described by her teacher as "imaginative, tough, alive: just like Flannery herself... The stories were quietly filled with insight about human weakness, hard and compassionate."⁹ The themes of her stories often were about displacement, homelessness, and homesickness.

Toward the end of this period, after several years of unsuccessful attempts at publication, her fiction began to be accepted both by popular magazines such as *Mademoiselle* (She published at the age of 21 her first short story, "The Geranium," in *Accent*.) and by more intellectually oriented journals such as *The Sewanee Review*. She also won the Rinehart-Iowa Fiction Award for her first novel in progress. The award gave Rinehart and Company the option to publish the book upon its satisfactory completion.

1.1.2 Prime of Life and Achievements

⁹ Robert Giroux, "Introduction," *The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor*, vii.

In 1948 and 1949, O'Connor spent considerable time working on her book at the Yaddo artists' colony near Saratoga Springs, New York. There she met the poet Robert Lowell, through whom she came to know the poet and translator Robert Fitzgerald, who and whose wife later became O'Connor's lifelong friends and co-compliers of her letters into *Habit of Being*. As she strove to complete her first novel, she became a paying guest at the home of Fitzgerald and his family. Friction developed with Rinehart when O'Connor refused to revise her book according to the publisher's editorial suggestions, and she resented Rinehart's characterization of her as uncooperative. She obtained her release from the agreement, and in October of 1950 signed a contract with Harcourt, Brace.

Shortly before leaving for home in December 1951 for a Christmas visit, she began to suffer pains in her arms and shoulder joints, and then developed a high fever on the train to Georgia. She was hospitalized on her arrival and diagnosed with *lupus*, the same disease that had killed her father, although she would not be informed of the diagnosis for over a year. Her medical condition would fluctuate over the remaining years of her life, and never again would she be completely healthy, but through cortisone therapy and a restricted diet she recovered sufficiently to resume work on her novel. Robert Giroux, her editor at Harcourt, sent her novel, which is now entitled *Wise Blood*, to the novelist Caroline Gordon, who offered extensive comments and recommendations, in the light of which O'Connor made further revisions. In contrast to her experience with Rinehart, she was quite responsive---and would remain so throughout her life---to insights from those who understood what she was trying to do and could help her see her way to achieving it, as opposed to those who, out of misunderstanding, sought to make her work more conventional.

Throughout her life, O'Connor was a devout, if not entirely orthodox, Catholic, but her fiction usually focused upon mainstream Southern whites who professed a Protestant faith of fundamentalist and often highly idiosyncratic tendencies. Also in

1952, O'Connor began an activity that would become one of the great pleasures and passions of her life, one that grew to be so closely associated with her in the minds of those who know her well---the raising of peafowl. Meanwhile, she continued to write and to publish short stories, including "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," which originally appeared in 1953 in a paperback anthology called *The Avon Book of Modern Writing*, and two years later became the title piece of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories*. This collection was well received by reviewers.

Despite her health problems, including joint deterioration in one hip and later in her jaws, O'Connor continued living and working with her mother on their family farm, visiting and corresponding with a great number of friends, writing more than one hundred book reviews for local Catholic publications, and bringing her second novel---*The Violent Bear It Away*---to completion, which was met with a mixed reception upon its publication in 1960, and some critics even brought up her illness in connection with her work, a common aspect of vulgar criticism.

1.1.3 Last Years and Legacy

What was known about Flannery, from the time she moved back to Georgia until she died, is mostly known through her correspondence with friends or admirers. And the letters posthumously compiled by Sally Fitzgerald in the book entitled *Flannery O'Connor: The Habit of Being* became an important source for researches on Flannery O'Connor, her life, her thinking, and her literary concepts.

In the early 1960s, O'Connor saw her reputation consolidated with the appearance of several essays on her fiction in the Summer 1962 issue of *the Sewanee Review* and the publication of her three books the following year in a one-volume paperback edition called *Three*. At the end of 1963, she once again suffered a pre-Christmas attack of illness, a fainting spell that led to the diagnosis of a fibroid tumor, which was surgically removed in February 1964. Suffering from a post-operative kidney infection and fearing the worst, she devoted her remaining strength to finishing her

last two of the nine stories planned for her forthcoming collection, *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. When the book appeared in 1965, it was a posthumous publication. O'Connor died of kidney failure on August 3, 1964, at the age of thirty-nine, leaving a legacy as one of the South's finest writers.

1.2 Flannery O'Connor's Literary Creations

In the carefully crafted prose of two novels and nineteen short stories that she deemed worthy of book publication (most of them were written when she was suffering *lupus*), she created a gallery of fantastic-seeming but deeply felt and sympathetic characters, in whose stories the humorous often gives way with sickening swiftness to the horrible, and whose lives, however twisted and tortured they may become, remain steadfast searches for the healing power of grace. Although many writers in this century have sought to catch the flavor of what critics customarily term "Southern Gothic," O'Connor is unsurpassed in the mingling of violence and beauty, of the glorious and grotesque, that is her particular mood and theme. Her strength lies in her unique ability to convey religious conviction and a dramatization of the conflict within individuals. The early inclusion of her work in the library of America, tantamount to certification as a classic, was a decision that no one who cares about American literature could find fault with.

In order to have a comprehensive view of Flannery O'Connor's achievement, a brief summary of her works is necessary here.

1.2.1 *Wise Blood*

Wise Blood is the first of Flannery O'Connor's two novels. It is a remarkable beginning for Flannery O'Connor (when she was 26 years old). Written in a taut, dry, economical and objective prose, it tells the life of the young protagonist, Hazel Motes, who recently mustered out of the US Army with his faith gone awry. He sets his minds on becoming an itinerant evangelist after the manner of his grandfather.

The only difference is that his Gospel is to be revolutionary. He is to preach “the Church without Christ.” And his symbols of his “ordination” are a preacher’s bright blue suit, a preacher’s fierce black hat, and a shabby second-hand Essex car. His hat is a symbol of a kind of interior anointing. The car is a symbol both of his “otherworldliness” and of his mechanism of escape from Christ. It is his own religious mystery: “Nobody with a good car needs to be justified.”¹⁰

He is accompanied by bizarre villains such as Asa Hawks, a preacher whose simulated blindness becomes for Hazel a temptation and a challenge; Sabbath Lily, Hawks’ daughter, whose body cries for Hazel’s and turns into a monster of sexual voracity; Enoch Emery, a fox-faced young demoniac, whose washstand is the altar of his Black Mass, who steals from a museum a mummy, which he thinks of as “the new Jesus,” and who eventually finds his religious fulfillment dressed in a stolen gorilla costume; and Onnie Jay Holy, who is Hazel’s disreputable *alter ego*. After a series of macabre events, Hazel kills his *alter ego* by running his car over him, wrecks his car and faces his *cul-de-sac*. He gives up his career as preacher and his arguing with Christ, spending his remaining years as a kind of urban anchorite, submitting himself to penances of an incredibly harsh nature---blinding himself with quicklime (in the pattern of Oedipus, blinding himself in order to see, to suggest that one must stop searching in order to find what one is looking for, that the peace of place is within---and beyond), wearing shoes interlined “with gravel and broken glass and pieces of small stone,” and wrapping barbed wires around his chest in the manner of Dimmesdale.¹¹

Flannery O’Connor’s first novel *Wise Blood* drew fairly wide and favorable critical acclaim. It succeeds in telling a tale at once delicate and grotesque, and adds in an important way to the grotesque literature of Southern decadence¹². From the start, it pinpoints Flannery O’Connor’s power in writing. Some of her charms come from her understanding of the anguish of minds tormented by God, and some from

¹⁰ O’Connor, *Wise Blood*, p. 113.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

¹² Melvin J. Friedman and Beverly L. Clark, Eds., *Critical Essays on Flannery O’Connor* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1985), p. 17.

her ability to anchor the fantastic in the specific, so that her characters go about their preposterous lives in a way that parodies with horrible fascination the actions of a sensible man. Her style here is bare and almost reportorial. The author is nowhere in sight. The shifting world which emerges from these pages is an animalistic world (the way O'Connor treats her characters will be discussed in details in the next chapter).

And this successful opening performance is followed by her second and last novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*.

1.2.2 *The Violent Bear It Away*

Flannery O'Connor's second novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*, has a means of immediately striking resemblances to its predecessor, in its religious theme, its Southern setting, its frequently violent or macabre action, and its spiritually absurd characters. It also concerns a young man who feels fated to become a preacher, does all that he can to avoid that fate, and finally achieves transcendence through an act of violence.

Francis Marion Tarwater (usually just "Tarwater"), like Haze Motes in *Wise Blood*, was obsessed first with denying and then with accepting Christ. He is a fourteen-year-old Southern orphan boy, who was in infancy baptized and later kidnapped by his great-uncle, who fancied himself a religious prophet. Raised to follow the old man's "calling," Tarwater nevertheless rebels; for when the great-uncle dies, the boy refuses to give him Christian burial and instead gets drunk and sets fire to the cabin where he thinks the corpse is (a Negro has meanwhile removed and buried it). Tarwater goes to the city, to his uncle, a schoolteacher called Rayber whom his great-uncle had likewise baptized and briefly kidnapped but who, at fourteen, had rejected religion; and from whom Tarwater had been kidnapped. Rayber has an unbaptized idiot son, called Bishop, whom of course the old man had tried to baptize and to kidnap and whom Tarwater is under injunction to baptize.

Tarwater rejects Rayber's clumsy attempts at befriending and educating him. Indeed, Rayber unintentionally keeps impressing the old man's lessons in on him, and Tarwater eventually half-accidentally drowns and half-unwittingly baptizes Bishop. He flees back to the cabin at Powderhead where he had lived with his great-uncle. On the way he is drugged and sexually assaulted while asleep by a man who gave him a ride; and awakening he sets fire to the clearing where he is left. At home he finds that his uncle's body had been buried after all; and in violent resignation he sets fire to the woods here too, feels the call of prophecy, and returns to the city to convert the unbelieving, to "save the children of God."

The novel is in the line of Southern literary tradition in its general mode as well--psychological realism leavened by a pervasive allegorical potentiality. It is built around a fairly collection of the stock material of contemporary southern fiction--the back-country farm, the fanatic old man, the twisted adolescent, even, the idiot child. It shows the encounter between a merely quantitative, verbal, distorted and distorting view of things (characteristic of Rayber, and symbolic of modern man too) and an intuitive, committed view of reality (represented by Tarwater), where the violent bear all before them.¹³

1.2.3 *The Complete Stories*

Besides, Flannery O'Connor's fame mostly lies in short stories, which were collected in *The Complete Stories*, covering all 31 pieces chronologically that Flannery O'Connor had worked out, among which 19 were taken from Flannery's two collections: *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (1955) and *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1965, posthumously) and which make up the bulk deemed worthy of publication by the author herself. The remaining 12 include the stories O'Connor wrote for her master's thesis at the University of Iowa and the original openings and other chapters of her two novels, and "The Geranium" (her virgin fictional creation and the earlier version of her last story, "Judgment Day") and "Why Do the Heathen

¹³ Melvin J. Friedman and Beverly L. Clark, *Critical Essays on Flannery O'Connor*, p. 33.

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