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**Flannery O'Connor**

Mary H. Ogilvie

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FLANNERY O'CONNOR

by

Mary H. Ogilvie

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
of master of science in education  
at the Jacksonville State University

Jacksonville, Alabama

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## SECTION I

### INTRODUCTION

#### A. Purpose of the Study

The entire body of Flannery O'Connor's published fiction can be found in two volumes. One, a Signet paperback called Three by Flannery O'Connor, contains her two novels and first short story collection. The other is the posthumous volume of short stories, Everything That Rises Must Converge. Miss O'Connor's work has already been subjected to much critical analysis and will undoubtedly be subjected to a great deal more before there is substantial agreement on just what it is that she is saying. The purpose of this study is to consider her attitude toward her art; to examine her philosophy as a Christian writer; to analyze her use of allegory and symbolism, principally in her novels; and to compare briefly her work to that of one other modern author, Nathanael West, and one traditional author, Nathaniel Hawthorne.

#### B. Method of Securing Data

A preliminary survey of popular and literary magazines and books of criticism has revealed that, because of the



recency of her emergence as an author of note, there is not a great deal in print on Flannery O'Connor, although the amount of criticism has increased since her death. Numbers of reviews of her novels and stories were found in secular and religious periodicals. Two essays on her craft, one contributed to Granville Hicks's symposium, The Living Novel, the other to Greyfriar, a literary magazine published by Siena College, provided valuable insight into Miss O'Connor's artistic and Christian beliefs. Two critical articles in one issue of the Sewanee Review, and two recently published pamphlets by Robert Drake and Stanley Edgar Hyman were helpful in suggesting additional points of view. The primary source of the material in this paper, however, is the study of the literary work of Flannery O'Connor, Nathanael West, and Nathaniel Hawthorne.

### C. Scope and Plan of Presentation

A close study of the two novels and nineteen short stories of Flannery O'Connor reveals that her attitude toward writing, as expressed in her essays, "The Fiction Writer and His Country" and "The Role of the Catholic Novelist," and her religious philosophy are consistently manifested in her work. She has used a great deal of allegory and symbolism to express this philosophy, as well as a startling fictional form which is in harmony with both. In order to establish a background for the discussion, the second section of this paper deals with Miss O'Connor's life. Sections Three and Four, respectively,

deal with her artistic and Christian convictions and her fiction. In examining the fiction, the themes and symbols of the novels are discussed in detail; one novel is compared to one by a modern author, and then the fiction and philosophy in general are compared with that of a traditional author. The final section consists of a summary of conclusions reached on questions considered in the preceding sections.

## SECTION II

### BIOGRAPHY

Mary Flannery O'Connor was born in Savannah, Georgia, on March 25, 1925. The only child of Edward F. and Regina Cline O'Connor, she received her early education in the parochial schools there, for both parents were members of old Roman Catholic families. In the late thirties, the family moved to Milledgeville, Georgia, Mrs. O'Connor's home town. The move was made necessary by Edward O'Connor's fatal illness, disseminated lupus, to which his daughter also would succumb. He died in 1940.

Mary Flannery graduated from Peabody High School in 1941 and Georgia State College for Women in 1945. It appears that at both schools she was active as well as studious. Her high school yearbook lists her hobby as "collecting rejection slips." At college she was editor of the literary magazine, feature editor of the annual, and art editor of the newspaper. This last activity is, in the opinion of the writer of this paper, significant because of the form of its later manifestation in her writing. For at the time, although she wrote fiction for The Corinthian, the literary quarterly, Mary Flannery considered herself a cartoonist. During her senior year, however, an interested teacher encouraged her to apply

for admission to Paul Engle's creative writing course at the University of Iowa. She was accepted; and, after receiving her Bachelor of Arts degree in Social Science at the Georgia college, went on to earn a Master of Fine Arts at Iowa in 1947.

Before going to Iowa, and after discussing the subject with her mother, Mary Flannery decided that her Southern double name would be anomalous in other parts of the country. Not wishing to be known as "Mary O'Connor," she dropped the "Mary" when signing her work.<sup>1</sup>

Flannery O'Connor's first story, "The Geranium," was published in Accent in 1946. It is interesting to note that this story appears, revised and reworked, as "Judgement Day," the last story in her posthumously published collection. From that time on, her work appeared in such magazines as Partisan Review, Kenyon Review, Sewanee Review, Harper's Bazaar, and Mademoiselle. Her first novel, Wise Blood, was published in 1952, and a collection of ten short stories in 1955.<sup>2</sup> The collection was given the title of the first story: A Good Man Is Hard To Find. It includes "A Circle in the Fire," which had won second prize in the O. Henry

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Drake, Flannery O'Connor (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1966), p. 9.

<sup>2</sup>In his sympathetic introduction to Everything That Rises Must Converge, Robert Fitzgerald says that Miss O'Connor described this collection, which she dedicated to him and his wife, as "Nine stories about original sin, with my compliments . . . ." (p. xxii) There are actually ten stories in the volume.



Awards.<sup>3</sup>

In 1956, her story "Greenleaf" took first prize in the O. Henry collection, and in 1957 she was awarded a grant from the National Academy of Arts and Letters. In 1960, her novel, The Violent Bear It Away, was published.<sup>4</sup>

From the time of the publication of Wise Blood, Miss O'Connor's work received increasing attention from a growing group of readers and critics. It was as overpraised by some as it was vigorously damned by others. The result, however, was that in addition to the awards already named, the young author received numerous others: Kenyon Review fellowships in 1953 and 1954, a Ford Foundation grant, O. Henry first prizes again in 1963 and 1964, honorary degrees from several colleges, and many requests to appear before college audiences.

Her response to all the attention was one of amused interest and full-as-possible participation. This, despite the fact that she undoubtedly felt from 1950 on that her time was limited. In December of 1950, Flannery O'Connor became extremely ill on the train on her way home from New York for Christmas. Hospitalized for weeks in Atlanta, she learned that her illness was the lupus which had killed her father.

This incurable disease, one of the arthritis-rheumatic fever group, primarily affects the blood vessels but can attack

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<sup>3</sup>"Flannery O'Connor," Current Biography Yearbook, VIII (New York: H. W. Wilson Company, 1958), pp. 549-550.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.



any organ as well as the bones. It can be controlled for a time by medication; but the remedy, a cortisone derivative, is strong and takes its own toll.

When Miss O'Connor was finally able to go home, she was too weak to climb stairs; and she and her mother moved to the family farm outside Milledgeville. By the end of the year, 1951, her health had improved enough that she could return to writing on a regular schedule, devoting her free time to raising peacocks. Thus she spent the remaining thirteen years of her life: out of the world enough to continue her writing, yet very much in and of it through her family and local associations. Many visitors (often complete strangers) came to the farm to see her. She and her mother graciously welcomed these interested individuals from all parts of the country, as well as local English classes, to their home. She also kept up a large correspondence with all sorts of people. Stanley Hyman says, "Any crank could write her and get a reply."<sup>5</sup> Evidently, from the numerous articles on, and excerpts from, O'Connor letters, she not only answered the cranks, but also took time to write regularly and helpfully to many would-be writers and admirers. And, even though by 1955 she had to use crutches to get about, she accepted as many speaking engagements as she could in various parts of the country. Almost all of the people who came into contact with her appear to have found Flannery O'Connor personally

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<sup>5</sup> Stanley Edgar Hyman, Flannery O'Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1966), p. 7.

not at all the prim, grim misanthrope they may have expected. Nor was she the dour personality she seems to have painted in her self-portrait. Many speak of her as almost pretty; and all appear to have been impressed by her unpretentiousness, directness and wit in conversation. Both latter characteristics are outstandingly present in her writing.

In the early part of 1964, as a result of abdominal surgery, the lupus became reactivated; and Flannery O'Connor knew that she was dying. She put aside the novel she had been working on (already titled Why The Heathens Rage; Esquire had published a portion of it) to assemble and polish her uncollected stories. She hoped to work up enough of them for a final collection. With tremendous effort, she managed to accomplish her purpose. When she died on August 3, 1964, the collection was ready. It was published the following spring under the title, Everything That Rises Must Converge.

Many of the people who mourned her spoke, naturally, of the loss to the world in the death of a writer so young and so talented. Others said that God's taking her proved that her work was finished. She herself must have felt earlier that she had reached some kind of turning point in her career. More than a year before she died, she had written to Sister Mariella Gable, O. S. B., "I've been writing eighteen years and I've reached the point where I can't do agsin what I know I can do well; and the larger things that I need to do now, I doubt my capacity for doing."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Esprit, Winter, 1964, p. 27.

Because of the unique character of the humor in Flannery O'Connor's fiction, it is illuminating to note the dry objectivity of many of her personal remarks. These remarks provide insight into the nature of a writer who, in the opinion of numbers of critics, was cold, hard, and unsympathetic to her fellowmen. Those who met her after reading some of her work had difficulty in reconciling the calm, soft-spoken young woman with their preconceived ideas of the author.

Robert Fitzgerald says Flannery O'Connor once wrote him, as she also remarked to others at various times, that she would like to do "a few sideline researches into the ways of the vulgar . . . though at times I feel that a feeling for the vulgar is my natural talent and don't [sic] need any particular encouragement."<sup>7</sup> She seems to have sprinkled her letters and conversation with such folksy idioms as "them interleckchuls" or "I've done forgot" to demonstrate her anti-intellectual spirit. She said of some of the intellectual types she met at New York literary dinners, "You know what's the matter with all that kind of folks? They ain't frum anywhere!"<sup>8</sup> She detested sentimentality and was contemptuous of the "pious trash" she felt most Catholic writers have turned out. She found the modern novels of purely sexual adventures equally distasteful: "Well, homosexuality ain't all right and

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<sup>7</sup>Robert Fitzgerald, Introduction to Everything That Rises Must Converge, Flannery O'Connor (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1965), p. xx.

<sup>8</sup>Op. cit., p. 11, Note 1.



it's about time somebody said so."<sup>9</sup>

For Mother's Day one year she gave her mother a donkey, explaining that it was for "the mother who has everything."<sup>10</sup> This was the animal she later described as having "a bad though friendly character."<sup>11</sup> She told an interviewer one time that "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" was the only story she read to college audiences because it was the only one of hers she could read aloud "without busting out laughing." On one occasion, she referred to some of her work as "Opus Nauseous No. 1." On another, she told a college student who asked her why Southern authors wrote about so many freaks, that it might be "because we're the only people who still recognize one when we see it." Later she remarked, "I'm interested in the Old Adam. He just talks Southern because I do."<sup>12</sup>

Her statement in the introduction to Herbert Gold's short story collection, Fiction of the Fifties, is the shortest of the authors represented. The authors had been asked to say in what way, if any, they felt writing in that decade was more difficult than in any other. Most pontificated at some length. Miss O'Connor tersely replied: "I presume that writing

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Op. cit., p. 8, Note 5.

<sup>11</sup>Op. cit., p. 12, Note 1.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 8.

in any age is equally a chore. I would not have found it less difficult in 250, 1350, or 5050."

Flannery O'Connor's references to the fatal illness she lived with for so many years are most revealing. She seems to have shown neither self-pity nor any indication that she was "making the best of it." She was candid and matter-of-fact in letters to friends about the inconvenience. She wrote to the Fitzgeralds at various times: "I am only a little stiff in the heels so far this winter and am taking a new kind of ACTH, put up in glue." "I have gotten a kind of Guggenheim. The ACTH has been reduced from \$19.50 per bottle to \$7.50." "I got word . . . I had been reappointed a Kenyon Fellow, so that means the Ruckerfellers [sic] will see to my blood and ACTH for another year and I will have to keep on praying for the repose of John D.'s soul." "I am doing pretty well these days, though I am practically baldheaded on top and have a watermelon face . . ." <sup>13</sup> Of her journey to Lourdes she said, "I had the best looking crutches in Europe." <sup>14</sup> In the early summer of 1964, one sentence concerning herself in a note to Robert Fitzgerald: "Ask Sally to pray that the lupus don't finish me off too quick." <sup>15</sup> And to someone else she wrote, with characteristic irony, at

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<sup>13</sup>Op. cit., pp. xx-xxi, Note 7.

<sup>14</sup>Op. cit., p. 8, Note 5.

<sup>15</sup>Op. cit., p. xxv, Note 7.



the beginning of her last illness: "I intend to survive this."<sup>16</sup> Perhaps she will.

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<sup>16</sup>Op. cit., p. 12, Note 1.

### SECTION III

#### CHRISTIAN AND ARTISTIC CONVICTIONS

Flannery O'Connor's attitude toward her craft was inevitably and inextricably mixed with her philosophy of life. This philosophy was built on her Roman Catholic faith, but shaped by her Southern heritage. In numerous comments, letters, articles (even in one on peacock raising), Miss O'Connor reiterates time and again certain basic principles of her artistic and Christian creed. This creed was both the cause and the result of the deep but narrow view of life which she so dramatically presents in her fiction.

To begin with, surprising as it may seem to some, this young woman firmly believed in divine inspiration. Like the great Puritan, Milton, who waited each night for his Heavenly Muse (the Holy Spirit), Flannery O'Connor felt that her creative ability came from the same Source. She said that she sat before her typewriter for three hours every day, and "if anything comes out, I am ready to receive it."<sup>17</sup> If, in this statement, she exaggerated her own passivity, it was

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<sup>17</sup>Melvin J. Friedman, "Flannery O'Connor: Another Legend in Southern Fiction," The English Journal, April 1962, p. 451.

probably to stress her conviction that a talent for writing, like any other vocation, is a gift from God. Possibly for this reason, too, she spoke more than once of humility as a desirable attribute of a writer--apparently from a feeling that the creative artist should be receptive to divine guidance in the use of his gift. For she said that he may, but should not, be dismayed "to learn that the imagination is not free, but bound . . . . The novelist cannot choose what he is able to make live."<sup>18</sup> In other words, while the writer may decide what he wants to write about, he has little control over what he can write about successfully. If his talent limits him to creating deformed characters which are credible, then he must write about deformed characters. The manner in which these characters are developed in any particular regional setting, however, must enable others to see the writer's vision of truth. For Miss O'Connor believed that the concerns of the serious Christian writer transcend any region. Thus, while the South's transitional condition today--its decreasing isolation and increasing likeness to the rest of the nation--is responsible for the large number of Southern writers, these writers need not fear becoming regional writers. (She felt all serious Southern writers had a horror of becoming regional writers.) They need not fear becoming regional writers, that is, if their concerns are

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<sup>18</sup> Flannery O'Connor, "The Role of the Catholic Novelist," Greyfriar, 1964, p. 7.



large enough: if they are able to write about what they see from a universal moral position. This latter concept is, of course, a kind of restatement of Aristotle's formulation that the creative writer must handle his material in such a way as to bring out the universal or characteristic features in particular events; and of Dryden's and Johnson's insistence that the artist impart a sense of the shared humanity of men through individual situations.

That is why Miss O'Connor emphasized that it is simply not enough for young Southern writers especially to be anguished over the loss of our customary manners and few virtues in the excision of some of our old vices.<sup>19</sup> What they choose to write about from what they observe, if it is to have any value, must be a statement of some general moral appeal. Here a belief in Christian principles actually becomes a help to the serious writer. It does so because, in a sense, it broadens one of those "common pools of knowledge" the English teachers speak of, the Bible. As Flannery O'Connor expressed it, this belief "forces the writer to observe . . . guaranteeing his respect for mystery."<sup>20</sup> This sense of the mysteriousness of life, of the infinitely unknown and unknowable qualities in it, was something she insisted on as necessary for the writer with Christian concerns.

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<sup>19</sup>Flannery O'Connor, "The Fiction Writer and His Country," *The Living Novel*, ed. Granville Hicks (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1957), p. 161.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 162.

Beyond this, she believed that while "the young Catholic writer is more liable than others to be smothered at the outset by theory, . . . because every given circumstance of the writer is ignored except his Faith,"<sup>21</sup> his belief "includes more reality for him to deal with."<sup>22</sup> His unique heritage thus enlarges his perception as well as his problems, although it does not prescribe his direction. The Southern writer, too, faces the same sort of dilemma. This makes it even more imperative that, as Conrad wrote, each artist descend within himself into his "region of stress and strife" to find the terms of his appeal.

Here it might be noted that if one wished to interpret Miss O'Connor's opinions in modern psycho-sociological terms, one might say that as an artist who was a woman, a Catholic, and a Southerner, she was always a member of a minority group: an outsider. This situation, when it does not embitter, often produces individuals of extraordinary perception and sensitivity to the condition of man. Each facet of her own special heritage was an additional point of observation and interpretation for Flannery O'Connor; and, as an artist, she knew it. The trouble with such an interpretation, in Miss O'Connor's view, is, of course, that it leaves out God. And God and His laws, sources of the artist's talent as well as all Christian principles, must

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<sup>21</sup>Op. cit., p. 6, Note 18.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.



be the basis of any common moral appeal; because, as she put it, "I am no disbeliever in spiritual purpose and no vague believer."<sup>23</sup>

These artistic and religious convictions led Flannery O'Connor to discover within herself those aspects of Southern life with which she felt a kinship strong enough to spur her to create. The kinship she felt most strongly was religious. It was religious perhaps because she was always interested in the interior life; and, growing up a Catholic in this traditionally Protestant region, she became aware of spirituality in (to her) strange places and uncongenial forms. Her firm belief in this spiritual kinship flows naturally, it seems to the writer, from the Christian concept of the brotherhood of man: a concept too consistently ignored by too many, including church members, in the past. This idea, along with her preoccupation with the Redemption (and the necessity for it) as the central facts of Christian experience, are primary themes of all Miss O'Connor's work. For this reason the work cannot properly be termed Catholic, even if, as one critic points out, "the themes of her stories are for the most part straight out of the [Roman Catholic] Catechism."<sup>24</sup> They are from the very first pages of that Catechism where the questions (Who made you? Why did God make you?) and answers come from the foundation of faith

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<sup>23</sup>Op. cit., p. 162, Note 19.

<sup>24</sup>Op. cit., p. 38, Note 6.

common to Christian denominations. They are not narrowly sectarian, but originate in the body of belief understood and professed in the Nicene Creed. Further, Miss O'Connor's view that the evil in the world is an absolute, stemming from the nature of man and inherent in it as a result of original sin, is a position taken from what she called "the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy."<sup>25</sup> It is a point of view which has long and often been the cause of dissension among Christians. In fact, it appears to be extremely close to the Manichean heresy of the third century. In the view of believers of this heresy, evil is positive, existing by itself, co-eternal and equal, though totally incompatible with Good (God). Miss O'Connor's dualism is equally radical, but based on the wholly Christian concept related above.

At any rate, this orthodox point of view is distinctly unfashionable today, and probably no more prevalent among Catholics than among Protestants. Priests and ministers have largely ceased to preach the hell-fire and damnation that for centuries was the theme of most: "Repent, ye sinners, or be damned." But it was a basic tenet of all Christian dogma, as closely associated with the sternest Protestants as with rigid Catholics, that all men were born sinners because of the sin of Adam. All men were required to earn Heaven by rooting out the resulting evil inclinations in themselves. As Flannery O'Connor expressed it, "Redemption

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<sup>25</sup>Op. cit., p. 162, Note 19.

is meaningless unless there is cause for it in the actual life we live, . . . "26

The cause, of course, as just stated, was the fall of man. Since man fell because of his own free will, he could be saved (after the Crucifixion) only by that same free will. He must accept and live up to the laws of God and be redeemed, or reject them and be damned. It is a harsh, narrow view which makes no concessions to the non-Christian world and to which many, therefore, object. They object principally, it appears, on the ground that Miss O'Connor's stories lack compassion. It must be agreed that most of her stories do lack compassion. But, in the opinion of the writer, one must look beyond this fact to the question: What difference does compassion actually make? The tragic fate of people (or characters) who wilfully pursue their own ends is no less affecting because observers or reporters are sympathetic. Would the people who perished in the Flood or at Sodom and Gomorrah have felt better about their fate had they known that the Almighty sorrowed at having to punish them for their continued disobedience? It is unlikely. Men can always rationalize and justify their transgressions. But the Ten Commandments list no exceptions or qualifications. They state emphatically: "Thou shalt" or "Thou shalt not." And this is the coldness of Flannery O'Connor: she sees man as so free that with his last breath he may say "No" to God.

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid.



If he does say "No," he must take the consequences. Thus it seems that many of those who decry her lack of compassion are, in reality, rejecting her commitment to an ideology which she refused to try to make palatable to non-Christians--an ideology which may indeed be unpalatable to many Christians today. We are all being conditioned, it appears, by the idea that a merciful God would not allow good men to suffer while the evil so often prosper in this world. The next step in this kind of reasoning, of course, is that since such conditions do exist, there is no God, merciful or otherwise. This conclusion, along with complete faith in the innate goodness of man (evil originates in forces outside him) obviously eliminates any necessity for Redemption. It is interesting to note that this belief was also the core of the Pelagian heresy of the fifth century. Today, as John Crowe Ransom pointed out, morality has been emancipated from its "religious overlords" and has become sociology.<sup>27</sup> This, obviously, is one of the things to which Flannery O'Connor objects fiercely. To her, "Modern people, having rejected Christ . . . have sentimentalized Him . . . in order to destroy Him."<sup>28</sup>

Here in the South, however, the older religious interpretation has persisted longer among more people than elsewhere

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<sup>27</sup>John Crowe Ransom, "Poets Without Laurels," The Literature of the South, ed. Richard Beatty, Floyd Watkins, and Thomas Young (New York: Scott, Foresman, and Co., 1952), p. 761.

<sup>28</sup>Flannery O'Connor, Introduction to Memoir of Mary Ann (author and publisher unknown), quoted by Anne Taillefer, The Catholic Worker, December, 1964, p. 7.

in the country. It has persisted because, as Miss O'Connor explained, "the South is a region where the Bible is read and believed in."<sup>29</sup> That is why she felt that the American writer concerned with faith is better off if he is a Southerner. He is better off also because the greater amount of individualism and enthusiasm still present in Southern life help to furnish a background against which he can judge and compare his characters. The high degree of individualism often leads some Southern fundamentalists to rather wild and distorted demonstrations of their commitment to a non-negotiable doctrine. Her realization of the real core of faith behind some of these peculiar expressions, and the radical nature of her own orthodoxy, made Flannery O'Connor deeply aware of the spiritual kinship which became the basis of her own "prophetic vision"<sup>30</sup> as a writer. Prophecy not in the sense of foretelling the future, but of seeing things in their full extensions of meaning. As she expressed it, "I am more and more impressed with the amount of Catholicism that fundamentalist Protestants have been able to retain. Theologically our differences with them are on the nature of the Church, not on the nature of God, or our obligation to Him."<sup>31</sup>

Other perceptive people, most of them less articulate than Miss O'Connor, have long been aware of the depth of the

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>30</sup>Op. cit., p. 9, Note 18.

<sup>31</sup>Op. cit., p. 26, Note 6.



foundation Catholicism shares with Protestantism, odd as this may seem to some, particularly Southern fundamentalists. But one of those who has commented is Allen Tate, born a Southern Protestant. He said, "Only in the South does one find a convinced supernaturalism: it is nearer to Aquinas than to Calvin, Wesley, or Knox."<sup>32</sup> Aquinas, of course, through the Thomistic philosophy derived from his writings, has dominated the theology of the Catholic Church since the third or fourth century.

Thus it seems apparent that Flannery O'Connor did see, as she said she did, the condition of man in terms of orthodox Christian theology; and she used the traditional terms in writing about it. She wrote directly of charity and mercy, sin and redemption, Heaven and Hell. While she yielded no principle in writing (as some say she did) in a non-Christian era, she implied that, to a certain extent, circumstance did influence her choice of the violent, shocking method she used to get her vision across. She compared the use of such a method to having to shout for the hard of hearing or having to draw big startling figures for the almost blind.

Here again Miss O'Connor felt fortunate in being a Southerner, for the previously mentioned flamboyant religiosity of some of the gospel sects was a perfect means of expression for her own fundamental Christian dualism. It was also suited

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<sup>32</sup>Op. cit., p. xx, Note 27.

to her talent. As she said, "I can't write about anything subtle . . . If I set myself to write about the essence of Christianity, I would have to quit writing fiction."<sup>33</sup> In this way her own God-given talent did bind her imagination to finding her subjects among sights and sounds which had developed a life of their own in her senses<sup>34</sup> and helped dictate the manner in which she presented them.

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<sup>33</sup>Op. cit., p. 27, Note 6.

<sup>34</sup>Op. cit., p. 7, Note 18.

## SECTION IV

### FICTION

#### A. Novels

When Flannery O'Connor died at thirty-nine, she left a small body of fiction about which there had been written an even smaller body of criticism. Since her death, several perceptive articles and two particularly good pamphlets (one by Robert Drake of the University of Texas; the other by Stanley Edgar Hyman of Bennington College) have been published. As one might expect, there are many areas of disagreement, as well as some general consensus, about what Miss O'Connor was trying to say. It is not possible here to discuss all of these points in detail, as interesting as it would be to do so. Only those which are most important and most relevant to the religious and artistic credo expressed by Miss O'Connor will be scrutinized, as well as some additional or conflicting views of the writer of this paper. In the first part of this section, because the same themes, images and symbols appear in virtually all of Miss O'Connor's fiction, the most significant in the two novels will be closely examined and compared to each other, with a few added examples from some of the short stories. In the second, Wise Blood will also be compared



to the Miss Lonelyhearts of Nathanael West, a modern author who greatly influenced Flannery O'Connor. Some of her short stories will then be analyzed briefly for the kinship which she said she felt to Nathaniel Hawthorne more than to any other American author.<sup>35</sup> Before proceeding with this discussion, however, statements on three major areas of misunderstanding must be reiterated.

First, to the South-haters who joyfully acclaimed her work as exposes of a violent, decadent region, Flannery O'Connor replies often. Several of these replies have been quoted in Section II. Since some critics, though, persisted in viewing her stories in this light, she continued to answer them. Perhaps the most pointed retort is the following one from an unpublished lecture: "I have found that any fiction that comes out of the South is going to be considered grotesque by the Northern critic, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be considered realistic."<sup>36</sup>

Second, many of the same people, self-styled liberals and intellectuals, upbraided Flannery O'Connor for what they considered her silence on the racial issue. To the writer of this paper, that is simply astounding. In virtually every story, Miss O'Connor makes it plain that, to her, isolation from one's fellow man leads to or from estrangement from God

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<sup>35</sup>John Hawkes, "Flannery O'Connor's Devil," Sewanee Review, Summer, 1962, p. 399.

<sup>36</sup>Op. cit., p. 44, Note 5.



and thus to damnation. In any Christian conception of the term fellow man, it is unnecessary to specify inclusion of any race, creed, or color: it is redundant. Even at that Miss O'Connor does make it clearer in at least three stories, "Everything That Rises Must Converge," "The Enduring Chill," and "The Displaced Person," that Negroes certainly are included in her belief that true equality is found only in the spiritual dignity of man. For that reason, she had as little use for sentimental integrationists, however, as she did for segregationists. The final point of general attack on Miss O'Connor's work was made by some Protestants who thought she was making fun of their religion. Many of her reasons for writing so often about Protestant evangelists have already been explained in Section III. Her most direct answer on the subject, however, was given to Granville Hicks in an interview in 1962: "I'm not interested in the sects as sects; I'm concerned with the religious individual, the backwoods prophet. Old Tarwater is the hero of The Violent Bear It Away, and I'm right behind him 100 per cent."<sup>37</sup> In addition, one has only to think of the unflattering pictures of the priests in the two stories, "The Displaced Person" and "The Enduring Chill," and "The Lapsed Catholic" boy in Wise Blood, to realize that if organized religion was her target, Miss O'Connor did not spare her own.

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<sup>37</sup>Granville Hicks, Saturday Review, May 12, 1962, pp. 22-23, quoted by Hyman, op. cit., p. 39, Note 5.

In a sense, organized religion was one of Flannery O'Connor's targets. It is part of one of the recurring themes in virtually all of her work, that people who give only lip service to the Word are damned as surely as those who refuse to believe. In fact, in most of her stories she seems to be on the side of the active disbelievers. She appears to see their vehement denials of Christ as a kind of negative affirmation. Many characters echo the words of The Misfit, in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find:" "If he did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him . . .;" and those of young Tarwater in The Violent Bear It Away (hereafter referred to as The Violent), "You can't just say NO . . . You got to do NO . . . You got to make an end of it one way or another."

The two novels, Wise Blood and The Violent, are primarily concerned with a central character who tries to make an end of it by violently rejecting Christ. In each, this character is a young man (or boy) who is determined to escape the mission imposed on him by a Father-figure. Each tries--like the Biblical prophets: Moses pleading his lack of eloquence, Isaias his unclean lips, and Jonas by running away--to evade the call of God. In this way, both are apparently, as some critics see them, novels about vocation. But beyond this, despite the fact that Miss O'Connor said she did not consider this a fit age for allegory and despite the fact that no reviewer encountered so identified them, the stories are obviously allegorical. It is man himself (called

"Haze" or "Tarwater") who perversely flees from the task God assigned him when Adam and Eve were driven from Paradise: the task of loving his brother and saving his own soul.

In the first book it is Hazel Notes's grandfather who is responsible for Haze's Jesus-fever. The grandfather was a circuit riding preacher who had "Jesus hidden in his head like a stinger" and drove into Eastrod every fourth Saturday "as if he were just in time to save them all from Hell."

In the second, it is Francis Marion Tarwater's great-uncle who kidnaps him "to raise . . . a Christian, and more than a Christian, a prophet! . . . and the burden will be on you!" Note the pregnant double meaning of those words.

In each novel the chief protagonist, like characters in other O'Connor stories, leaves a home or town where others no longer live. The meaning of this device may be explained by Haze's words as he preaches blasphemously that there had been no Fall and no Redemption: "Where you come from is gone, where you thought you were going to never was there, and where you are is no good unless you can get away from it." It is a satirical summary of modern Godless philosophies. It is directly opposed to old Tarwater's extreme Christian idea: "The world was made for the dead . . . There's a million times more dead than living and the dead are dead a million times longer than the living are alive." This statement in turn clarifies the quotation prefacing the collection, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." Miss O'Connor chose the epigraph from



the writings of St. Cyril of Jerusalem: "The dragon is by the side of the road, watching those who pass. Beware lest he devour you. We go to the father of souls, but it is necessary to pass by the dragon."

Drake, the only critic encountered who even speculated on the meaning of the passage, wonders if the dragon is the devil in some form or "Christ the tiger Who . . . devours us when we fail His sphinx-like riddle: 'What think ye of Jesus?'"<sup>38</sup> It is the opinion of the writer of this paper that the dragon could only be life itself. Once man is born he is launched on his mission because obviously where he came from is gone. If he denies Christ, he is fleeing God's call so there is no place to go--it never existed. Life and death then have no meaning. Thus life is the dragon, man has no choice but to make a choice, which man must pass in order to join the Father. In this sense, the world was "made for the dead."

The recurring picture, in Miss O'Connor's fiction, of the pasture or clearing rimmed by dark woods strengthens this image of the world as an arena where man wrestles with the Devil, or his Lord, for his own soul. The woods also seem to symbolize the Devil or unknown evil which may separate man from God. At the beginning of The Violent, young Tarwater sees across the clearing "the light blue fortress line of trees set against the empty sky." On his last ride with Satan,

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<sup>38</sup> Op. cit., p. 23, Note 1.



he is "looking into the thick unfenced woods." Haze, in Wise Blood, has his vision of evil as he looks from a red clay embankment down across a burnt pasture to where a buzzard sits in a tree at the edge of the woods. In the short story, "A Circle in the Fire," the child thinks "the blank sky looked as if it were pushing against the fortress wall [of trees across the field], trying to break through."

Both novels are tightly unified by this kind of symbolism as well as foreshadowing. In Wise Blood, the very name of the principal character foreshadows his self-blinding: Hazel (or "Haze") Motes. Haze keeps his dead Mother's glasses "in case his vision should ever become dim." He rhetorically asks the first audience he preaches to: "Don't I have eyes in my head? Am I a blind man?" He calls the fake evangelist, Hawks, "a blind fool," and Hawks's daughter says she likes Haze's eyes because "They don't look like they see what he's looking at but they keep on looking."

The traditional Christian figure of physical sight opposed to spiritual blindness is also often used. For example, Hawks, the blind evangelist, tells Haze he can hear the urge for Jesus in his voice, even while Haze is saying, "Jesus don't exist," and, "I don't believe in sin."

In The Violent, the name of the central figure is equally significant. Francis Marion, the "Swamp Fox," was a Revolutionary War guerrilla general and tarwater is a discredited old folk remedy.<sup>39</sup> While the foreshadowing is less

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<sup>39</sup>Op. cit., p. 20, Note 5.

frequent, it is most effective. Old Tarwater tells his great-nephew: "You are the kind of boy that the devil is always going to be offering to assist, to give you a smoke or a drink or a ride, and to ask you your bidnis. You had better mind how you take up with strangers." This prefigures what finally does happen to bring the full knowledge of evil to young Tarwater. When he first approaches the city, the boy mistakes its lights for the glow of the fire he had set before leaving home, foreshadowing the fire he again sets when he becomes a prophet. Bishop's fall into the park pool and Rayber's admission to Tarwater that he did not "have the guts" to drown his retarded child, prefigure Tarwater's deed. A salesman predicts that Tarwater "won't come to no good end." As far as the world is concerned, he does not: he becomes a prophet.

In each story there are secondary characters and symbols which enrich the main theme and suggest others. In The Violent, while Tarwater's rejection of his vocation is the central action, the opposition of his young uncle, Rayber, identifies another theme: the hostility of science and logic to the spiritual and mysterious. Rayber, a thoroughly enlightened school teacher, is determined, after the old uncle dies, to redeem young Tarwater by educating him away from his religious superstitions. The boy, though resistant to the old man's injunction, is equally determined to redeem Rayber's idiot son, Bishop, by baptizing him.

Satan, in several forms, is a character in both books. In Wise Blood, he appears as Hoover Shoats alias Onnie Jay Holy, an opportunist in a panama hat, carrying a lavender handkerchief. He tries to promote Haze's Church Without Christ to make money, and intrudes on Haze's preaching to tell the people "you can trust this church, friends, . . . it's nothing foreign connected with it. You don't have to believe nothing you don't understand and approve of. If you don't understand it, it ain't true, and that's all there is to it." He later advises Haze, "If you want to get anywheres in religion, you got to keep it sweet."

In The Violent, the Devil is sometimes a cynical voice in young Tarwater's mind, at others a friendly stranger in a panama hat. Finally, as a lavender-eyed stranger, he gives the boy the ride which leads to his real acquaintance with evil.

The principal symbol unifying this story is burning. His old uncle tells young Tarwater that "evils that come from the Lord burn the prophet clean," and "even the mercy of the Lord burns." He had left a note, when he kidnapped the boy from Rayber: "THE PROPHET I RAISE UP OUT OF THIS BOY WILL BURN YOUR EYES CLEAN." After old Tarwater's death, the younger burns their shack to try to cremate his body in defiance of the old man's instructions for a Christian burial. In this way he hopes also to get rid of his obligation to prophesy. After the boy's rape by the Devil, he symbolically cleanses himself by setting fire to the woods where it happened.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.



Another important symbol is that of the spiritual hunger and feeding repeatedly alluded to. The hunger which young Tarwater had sensed "as the heart of his great-uncle's madness, this hunger . . . he was secretly afraid . . . might strike some day in him . . . so that nothing would fill it but the bread of life." Old Tarwater has "silver protruding eyes . . . like two fish straining to get out of a net," and his stomach sticks up out of his coffin "like over-leavened bread." The boy is constantly hungry, but food nauseates him and he keeps saying he does not want "the bread of life." When he finally knows that he, too, will be a prophet, he feels "his hunger no longer as a pain but as a tide . . . rising in himself [as it had risen] . . . in a line of men whose lives were chosen to sustain it."

The structure of Wise Blood, its characters and symbols, are more complicated than that of The Violent, and less unified. The most puzzling secondary character in it is the boy with wise blood, Enoch Emory. He works at the city zoo, hating and envying the animals their comfortable lives behind bars. He keeps trailing Haze telling him that he is "only eighteen year old," went to the Rodemill Boys' Bible Academy and learned all about Jesus: "If it's anything you want to know about Jesus, just ast me." His comic-pathetic attempts to find a friend in the unfriendly city make one feel that he is a symbol of alienated man. A little over halfway through the book Enoch is left sitting sadly on a rock. He has killed an actor to get the gorilla suit he thought would



make him popular. It only makes people run from him. He has thus pursued a false Christ and is left with nowhere to go.

Sabbath Lily, the daughter of the fake blind evangelist, Hawks, is a character who encourages Haze in sinning as he tries to prove there is no Jesus. She leaves him when she discovers, as she tells him, "you wouldn't never have no fun or let nobody else because you didn't want nothing but Jesus!"

Two of the chief symbols in this book are the rocks and Haze's Essex. There are frequent references to rocks in the landscape and Haze, as a boy, puts small rocks in his shoes to punish himself for nasty thoughts. Toward the end of his life he is again walking on them to try to atone for the sins he has committed. One time when he is out driving he sees a big rock with "Jesus Saves" painted on it. Once, too, we are told that Hazel's "face might have been cut out of the side of a rock." While he is preaching his "Church Without Christ" his Bible sits "like a rock in the bottom of the [duffel] bag."

Hyman sees these rocks as part of what he calls a "metaphor" for Roman Catholic truth. He feels that Protestant Fundamentalism is Miss O'Connor's complete "metaphor" for Roman Catholic truth, and finds her explanation that she used it because she grew up in the milieu unsatisfactory.<sup>41</sup> Obviously there were other contributing factors: they have been discussed in Section III. It is believed, however, that

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 39.

in coming to the conclusion he did, Mr. Hyman overlooked the fact that Flannery O'Connor's sharpest barbs are directed at characters who epitomize the middle-class virtues. For the most part they are clean, energetic, thrifty people who say, like Mrs. McIntyre in "The Displaced Person," "I'm not theological. I'm practical;" and like Mrs. Flood in Wise Blood, "I'm as good . . . not believing in Jesus as many a one that does." These people feel, like The Misfit, "I don't want no hep. I'm doing all right by myself." It would seem clear then that to Miss O'Connor the rock of faith is Christian truth, religion opposed to secularism, not just Roman Catholic truth.

The Essex, in this writer's opinion, is one of the most original creations in modern fiction. It is not only a symbol, but a character and a theme of the story. Some of the most mordantly comic scenes anywhere are written around it. To begin with, although he has driven little and never owned or wanted a car, on his third day in the city Haze decided to buy one. He has fifty dollars to spend. On a used car lot he finds what he decides to buy. "It was a high rat-colored machine with large thin wheels . . . bulging head-lights . . . one door tied with a rope . . . an oval window in the back." The conversation between Haze and the salesman is, like most O'Connor dialogue, full of irony and paradox. There is the reader's constant awareness of non-communication, although the characters are ostensibly talking with each other.

"You won't find a car like that ever' day," the man said. "All new tires."

"They were new when it was built," Haze said . . . .  
"What you want for it?"

The salesman launches into a long explanation about good cars not being built any more because "all the niggers are living in Detroit now, putting cars together . . . ." When he finishes, Haze says, "I wouldn't pay over thirty dollars for it." After some trading, the deal is made and gas put into the car. The salesman and his son stand silently watching as Haze tries to start it. Since he has not driven for several years, he has a great deal of difficulty, which he tries to cover by remarking:

"I wanted this car mostly to be a house for me, I ain't got any place to be."

"You ain't took the brake off yet," the man said.

Immediately after Haze buys the car he drives it to a garage, where he tells the man he wants the horn made to blow, the leaks in the gas tank fixed, the starter made to work smoother, and the windshield wipers tightened. When he asks how long it will take to put it in order, the man replies:  
"It can't be done."

"This is a good car," Haze said. "I knew when I first saw it that it was the car for me and since I've had it, I've had a place to be that I can always get away in."

"Was you going some place in this?" the man asked.



"To another garage," Haze said, and he got in the Essex and drove off. At the other garage he went to, there was a man who said he could put the car in the best shape over night, because it was such a good car to begin with, so well put together and with such good materials in it, and because, he added, he was the best mechanic in town, working in the best-equipped shop. Haze left it with him, certain that it was in honest hands.

Later, when a boy in still another garage tells Haze, "It ain't any use to put water in it because it won't hold it," he orders it put in anyway because the car is just beginning its life and lightning couldn't stop it.

Earlier, in the funniest, most pointed line in the whole book Haze tells Sabbath Hawks:

"Nobody with a good car needs to be justified."

It is clear, from the description of the car and from what is said about it, that it is a symbol of the imperfect works of man. Imperfect works on which modern man, nevertheless, relies to make him independent of God, and which he worships instead of God. He worships them because he can understand them, scorning the spiritual which he cannot. It seems then that the Essex is thus also the personification of an attitude, some call it anti-intellectualism, which pervades Miss O'Connor's fiction. It is an attitude which equates material progression with spiritual regression. As for example, when Rayber tries to tell young Terwater what a great engineering achievement flying is, the boy says, "I wouldn't give you nothing for no airplane. A buzzard can fly." When Mr. Shiftlet, in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own", tells the



old lady "the monks of old slept in their coffins," she replies, "They wasn't as advanced as we are." And in many of the short stories the children of the clean and energetic but irreligious women are lazy and mean, while those of the unenlightened and religious are successful.

In both novels the central characters are identifiable by what Hyman calls "the author's usual sign of election, Jesus' Noli me tangere."<sup>42</sup> In The Violent, young Tarwater tells the Negro who scolds him for not taking care of his uncle's body, "Nigger . . . take your hand off me." And in Wise Blood, Haze says the same thing to several people who touch him--Enoch, a policeman, a truck-driver: "Take your hand off me."<sup>43</sup>

The characters in these novels lack warmth and depth. Most of the situations they are involved in are bizarre and full of double meaning. The pace is fast and wild. The resulting picture of the world is decidedly more unpleasant than uplifting, and there seems to be no doubt that Miss O'Connor is more concerned with provoking thought than being entertaining. For these reasons and those detailed above, it is believed that the stories are allegorical. They are modern versions of some of the experiences of the prophets

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>43</sup>All quotations in this section from Wise Blood, The Violent Bear It Away and the short stories by Flannery O'Connor are from Three by Flannery O'Connor (New York: Signet, 1964).

of old and seem to be elaborations on Francis Thompson's theme "The Hound of Heaven." For Haze and young Tarwater or man himself, might say with Thompson:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;  
 I fled Him, down the arches of the years;  
 I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways  
 Of my own mind and in the mist of tears  
 I hid from Him, . . .

(For though I knew His love Who followed,  
 Yet was I sore adread  
 Lest, having Him, I must have naught  
 beside);<sup>44</sup>

#### B. Comparison

Flannery O'Connor's outstanding characteristic as a writer is her use of the violent and the grotesque to get her Christian vision across to an essentially unbelieving world. She felt that the moral principles of modern readers are obscured in clouds of compassion. These readers do not have enough beliefs in common to make this a fit age for allegory and spiritual realities either do not exist for them at all, or are believed to be recognizable through sensibility. Thus they have little or no sense of evil and have forgotten the price of salvation.<sup>45</sup> Miss O'Connor was not overly concerned that among such readers, her public was limited by the radical nature of her Christian dualism. She said of The

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<sup>44</sup>Francis Thompson, The Hound of Heaven (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1960), pp. 45, 47.

<sup>45</sup>Op. cit., pp. 10-11, Note 8.

Violent Bear It Away, "I can wait fifty years, a hundred years for it to be understood."<sup>46</sup> And she seems to have regarded her task (the task of any Christian writer) as evangelistic: to make the fact of Christ real to people who not only have rejected Him but "are trying desperately to exorcize His ghost."<sup>47</sup>

The world Flannery O'Connor writes of and for, then, is ugly, wild and disorderly. Her characters are mean, intense and outlandish. They are more caricatures than fully developed people, and she relates their tales in direct, economical prose. She has a knack for brief, vivid description, as well as a fine ear for the flat, country cadences of rural Southerners. Her wit, one of the most distinctive characteristics of her work, is devastating. It is most evident in the ferocious irony of some of the speeches of her characters and the situations they become involved in. Despite the fact that her own work is extremely modern in conception, she deplored experimental fiction ("If it looks peculiar, I don't read it.") and most modern literary methods. Her first novel, Wise Blood, is written in a currently popular form, the modern version of the episodic, picaresque narrative. Both novels and her stories generally follow a strict chronological pattern. They contain no existentialist brooding on

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<sup>46</sup>Op. cit., p. 27, Note 6.

<sup>47</sup>Anne Traillifer, "A Memoir of Flannery O'Connor," The Catholic Worker, December, 1964, p. 2.



the ills of the world or stream-of-consciousness narration.

Nevertheless, in addition to having to follow the direction of her talent and to consider the philosophy of the age in which she was writing, Flannery O'Connor was also influenced in her choice of form by contemporary literary fashion. Early in her career she had read Nathanael West's Miss Lonelyhearts and Faulkner's As I Lay Dying.

Her debt to Faulkner seems to be principally one of tone, and often not specifically identifiable. It is most noticeable in The Violent, however, where there are burial complications of a nature similar to those in As I Lay Dying. One of the unifying devices is the same: repeated reference to death and burial. There are also over all similarities between Faulkner's Snopeses and O'Connor's poor whites. In both there is a series of observers who, like a Greek chorus, comment on the action.

The resemblance to West, on the other hand, especially in Wise Blood and some of the early stories, is unmistakable. It is difficult to understand why no reviewer noticed it for so long. The flat cartoon-characters, ugly, garish images, the vulgar, ferocious comedy, diabolical and allegorical figures are strikingly similar. While Miss O'Connor quite often, particularly in later stories, created a few characters of some depth, most of hers and all of West's (with the possible exception of Miss Lonelyhearts himself) are savage caricatures with whom one can scarcely identify or sympathize. The additional dimension of her cartoon-like people may be proved by

the reader's occasional feeling of resentment toward the author's air of complete detachment from their terrible fates. One gets none of this from West. Even his not giving the chief protagonist of Miss Lonelyhearts any other name (a device Miss O'Connor uses in her short story, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find") illustrates his complete commitment to the pessimistic view of life.

Both Flannery O'Connor and Nathanael West use crude, often repulsive comparisons in describing people. In Miss Lonelyhearts a bloodshot eye glows "like a ruby in an antique ring;" Miss Lonelyhearts' tongue is a "fat thumb;" his heart "a congealed lump of icy fat;" a fellow worker has cheeks "like twin rolls of smooth pink toilet paper."

In Wise Blood, an old woman has "two bright flea eyes," Haze's eyes are "the color of pecan shells" and he has "a nose like a shrike's bill." (Shrike is also the name of a character in West's novel.) Enoch has "a fox-shaped face," while a woman he describes has hair so thin it looks "like ham gravy trickling over her skull."

In Wise Blood, the description of Sabbath Lily's correspondence with the writer of an advice column is pure West. Miss Lonelyhearts is, of course, an advice columnist and the letters he receives are "stamped from the dough of suffering with a heart shaped cookie knife." Sabbath Lily writes Mary Brittle to ask how far she should go in necking with boys. She says that since "a bastard shall not enter the kingdom of heaven" and she is a bastard she can't see what

difference it makes whether she goes "whole hog" or not. Mary Brittle's comic reply contains a sharp thrust at a favorite O'Connor target, religious moderates:

Dear Sabbath, Light necking is acceptable, but I think your real problem is one of adjustment to the modern world. Perhaps you ought to re-examine your religious values to see if they meet your needs in Life. A religious experience can be a beautiful addition to living if you put it in the proper perspective and do not let it warf sic you. Read some books on Ethical Culture.<sup>48</sup>

The rocks in Wise Blood--in Haze's shoes, on paths, in the park--remind one of the rock (of undigested sympathy for human suffering) which Miss Lonelyhearts first has in his intestine; the rock he finally becomes by withdrawing; and the rock on which a new church will be founded.<sup>49</sup> West makes it clear that Miss Lonelyhearts is a Christ figure. He even has him say he has a "Christ-complex,"<sup>50</sup> but he is a Christ without a church. In this, Miss Lonelyhearts is the complete opposite of Flannery O'Connor's Haze, who wants a "Church Without Christ." Haze, fleeing from his vocation, still searches for the truth he instinctively recognizes is present in religion. Miss Lonelyhearts, on the other hand,

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<sup>48</sup>Op. cit., Note 43.

<sup>49</sup>Op. cit., p. 43, Note 5.

<sup>50</sup>All quotations in this section from Miss Lonelyhearts are from The Complete Works of Nathanael West (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, Inc., 1957).



recognizes his vocation as that of a spiritual shepherd, but since he sees no meaning in life, he has no church in which to practice that vocation.

This, of course, is the essential difference between the fiction of Flannery O'Connor and that of Nathanael West. It is the principal difference which exists between her work and that of other contemporaries which critics attempt to classify as grotesque. For her fiction, as Ruskin observed the true grotesque must, always recognize the moral nature of the universe.

The world Miss O'Connor writes of is weird, warped and disorderly. It is almost as violent and shocking as the world of Nathanael West. But West's world is the way it is because there is no God: men and their lives are merely absurd. Flannery O'Connor's world is in the condition it is because she feels, like Cardinal Newman, that "the human race is implicated in some terrible aboriginal calamity. It is out of joint with the purposes of its Creator."<sup>51</sup>

This preoccupation with the effects of original sin is the heart of Flannery O'Connor's resemblance to Nathaniel Hawthorne. There are other similarities which appear when the short stories of the two are compared and it is somewhat surprising that only two people, in all the reviews and critical works this writer had access to, even mentioned Hawthorne's name. It is surprising because Miss O'Connor

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<sup>51</sup> Cardinal Newman, Apologia Pro Vita Sua, quoted in op. cit., p. 18, Note 6.

herself said that she felt "more of a kinship with Hawthorne than with any other American writer."<sup>52</sup>

Each critic of course, finds similarities among the writers he is most familiar with; and all artists while they do not wish to imitate their predecessors, are influenced by them. Also, Francis Kunkel believes, every writer worth consideration, every writer who, in the widest sense of the term, can be called a poet, is a person who is the victim of an obsession.<sup>53</sup> Naturally then, there are certain resemblances among those who have the same obsessions.

Among those who manifest some of the same obsessions as Flannery O'Connor, and to whom she has most often been compared, are Dostoievski, West and Faulkner, and Graham Greene. The radical nature of Miss O'Connor's Christian dualism and its expression in stories of violence and murder are the basis of her similarity to Dostoievski. Some of the characteristics of her likeness to West and Faulkner have already been described. The principal aspect of her resemblance to Greene is not, as some might assume, their common religion. It is, rather, the recognition that what Camus regards as the feeling of modern man "that the religious sense is hostile to human aspiration"<sup>54</sup> is simply the age-old

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<sup>52</sup>John Hawkes, "Flannery O'Connor's Devil," Sewanee Review, Summer, 1962, p. 395.

<sup>53</sup>Francis L. Kunkel, The Labyrinthine Ways of Graham Greene (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1959), p. 6.

<sup>54</sup>R. W. B. Lewis, The Picaresque Saint (New York: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1958), p. 221.

struggle of man to be born again into virtue despite his vision of evil.

In this struggle toward virtue, toward redemption, Flannery O'Connor, like Hawthorne, sees man's greatest enemy as his own intellect. For if the intellect is allowed to expand without corresponding spiritual growth, man easily becomes prey to the devil. Both see the devil as a very real presence in the world, seeking to possess man's soul. At the same time, they believe that, as Hawthorne's Satan says in "Young Goodman Brown," "Evil is the nature of man."

Hawthorne and Miss O'Connor see the intellectually developed but morally stunted man as almost surely damned. To Hawthorne, he is most susceptible to damnation because, feeling superior to his fellow men, he isolates himself first from them, then from God. To Flannery O'Connor, he is headed for damnation because, feeling independent of God, he estranges himself from Him and thereby loses respect for the spiritual dignity of other men. To Hawthorne, then, man's salvation lies in human companionship and involvement which lead to God. To Miss O'Connor, salvation lies in acceptance of the grace of God which bestows recognition of the spiritual dignity of all men. Both, therefore, manifest a deep belief in the brotherhood of man and in man's weakness before God, with a resulting distrust of science and extreme intellectuality.

Hawthorne seldom states his beliefs explicitly (and then only as the intrusive author), but expresses them in



allegories and in symbols in his stories. Flannery O'Connor does try to explain her beliefs in several essays, perhaps because her work is so widely misunderstood. For she, too, relies heavily on symbols and allegory. While Hawthorne emphasizes sin and retribution more than redemption through grace, he does not see all sinners as hopelessly damned. Miss O'Connor, on the other hand, appears to believe strongly in redemption through grace, but most of her characters are too perverse to accept it. Both seem to feel that those who are damned deserve their fate.

For example, in Hawthorne's "Ethan Brand," the central figure commits "the Unpardonable Sin" of allowing his intellect to triumph over his sense of brotherhood with man and reverence for God. He kills himself rather than live with the knowledge of his guilt. But Roderick Elliston, in "Egotism," is saved from his morbid preoccupation with the snake in his bosom by the love of his wife, and is restored to the community of man. In Flannery O'Connor's "The Displaced Person," Mrs. Shortley and Mrs. McIntyre are both unable to endure revelation of the evil in themselves. Both have strokes. Mrs. Shortley's is fatal, while Mrs. McIntyre's incapacitates her for the rest of her life. Fat Mrs. Turpin, in "Revelation," on the other hand, seems to have the capacity to endure her vision, and the reader is given the impression that she will be able to redeem herself. It is significant that Mrs. Turpin, one of the few characters in Miss O'Connor's short stories to escape damnation, is also one of the few who

have a warm relationship with another human being: her husband.

Both of these writers use physical deformity to suggest inner distortion and clothing to reveal the nature of the man it covers. Here again, though, the manner is reversed. Flannery O'Connor sees the ugliest physical features of people (ugliness seems to be one of her prime preoccupations), obesity, pointed teeth, crossed eyes, as outward signs of the evil in them. Hawthorne usually sees the ordinary physical features marred by slight deformities, birthmarks, repellently furrowed faces, lank black hair, which suggest human frailty. Often he depicts physical perfection, such as that of Aylmer in "The Birthmark" and "the certain man" in "The Christmas Banquet," as the disguise of empty souls. His rich velvet and silken garments serve the same purpose, while Miss O'Connor's fierce black hats and electric blue suits indicate the spirit of the wearers. Each has favorite symbols which reappear in the tales. Hawthorne, for instance, uses the hearth to symbolize human companionship and a small light (such as a lantern) to suggest eternal truth; while Flannery O'Connor uses the sky, sun, water as religious symbols. Both employ the figure of the woods as a symbol of darkness or evil. The works of both are full of double meaning and most of the names of their characters are significant.

It is only natural that because of the more than one hundred years which intervenes between the lifetimes of Hawthorne and Flannery O'Connor, their styles are entirely

different. His is leisurely, formal, and was a little old fashioned even when he wrote it.<sup>55</sup> Hers is fast-paced, precise, and very modern. But despite Hawthorne's loss of immediacy by his intrusiveness, his gain in meaning is great. Today his intense examination of the problems of man's alienation and man's profound "unknowableness," is particularly relevant. Instead of being patronized as he was for years (Henry James called his stories "charming"), critics recognize him as one of the first writers of what is presently called "psychological" fiction. Because his psychological reflections are always motivated by moral questions, he has a depth far beyond that of most modern writers. And it is in the nature of the questions he ponders, the conclusions he comes to regarding them, and the symbolical and allegorical means he uses to present these conclusions, that Flannery O'Connor most resembles Nathaniel Hawthorne.

"Earth's Holocaust" is one of the stories in which Hawthorne expresses convictions which appear repeatedly in his tales and are depicted, in the modern manner, in Miss O'Connor's. A spectator at a bonfire to rid the world of wornout rubbish comments, when implements of war and torture are thrown in, that it will only make more work for armorers and cannon founders because there will always be wars. A second says that when Cain wished to slay his brother, he

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<sup>55</sup> Hyatt H. Waggoner, Nathaniel Hawthorne (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1962), p. 18.



needed no weapon. A general remarks that the necessity for war lies deeper than honest gentlemen suppose. The narrator then reminds the general that "in this advanced stage of civilization, Reason and Philanthropy combined will constitute just such a tribunal as is requisite." "Ah, I had forgotten that, indeed!" the old warrior says as he walks away.

The Bible is thrown on a "blazing heap of falsehood and wornout truth" because "the inhabitants of earth had grown too enlightened" to need it. But the next day the Holy Scriptures, instead of being burned to ashes "only assumed a more dazzling whiteness as the finger marks of human imperfection were purified away." The one thing the "wiseacre reformers" forgot to burn, so the fire was for nothing, was the human heart: "that foul cavern forth from which will re-issue all the same old shapes of wrong and misery . . . Purify that inward sphere, and the many shapes of evil . . . will vanish; but if we go no deeper than the intellect, and strive, with that feeble instrument, to discern and rectify what is wrong, our whole accomplishment will be a dream, so unsubstantial it matters little."<sup>56</sup>

Flannery O'Connor presents, in story after story, a devastating picture of the fate awaiting those who feel themselves superior to others because of their intellectual

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<sup>56</sup>Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Earth's Holocaust," Hawthorne's Short Stories, ed. Newton Arvin (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959).

accomplishments. Sheppard, the social worker in "The Lame Shall Enter First," loses his only child when the boy hangs himself. Sheppard had been so busy trying to reform a crippled orphan that he shut his heart to the needs of his own son. Julien, in "Everything That Rises Must Converge," is so savagely critical of, and feels so superior to, his less educated mother that he never considers her yearning for companionship. It is only as she dies of a stroke, indirectly brought on by his actions, that he realizes the enormity of his guilt. Hulga, the Ph.D. in "Good Country People," is left sitting in a barn loft without her artificial leg when she is tricked by an illiterate young man she intended to seduce. Like many of Hawthorne's characters, she had planned to experiment on a human being she considered herself superior to; and like the self-sufficient women who appear in so many O'Connor stories, she finds herself truly alone when confronted by the evil which is masked by apparent innocence.

The appearance of purity and innocence is what deceives Hawthorne's Roderick Elliston into lingering near the fountain where the snake enters his bosom. Pride and confidence in his intellectual attainments lead Aylmer, in "The Birthmark," to believe he can remove the one blemish on an otherwise perfect creature of nature: the wife he so dearly loves. As the last of the birthmark fades, she dies. Rappacini, in "Rappacini's Daughter," indirectly causes the death of the only human being he professes to love but uses

in his experiments, his daughter. The man in "The Christmas Banquet" appears to have everything: money, success, a handsome wife and children. When anyone gets close to him, however, he is unsubstantial, chill, a vapor. He has a sense of cold unreality he would gladly exchange for any real grief fate would send him.

On the basis of these and many other similarities one must indeed conclude that there is great kinship between Hawthorne and Flannery O'Connor. Both explore the very modern, and the very old, problem of man's isolation from his fellow man and from God. No matter which comes first it leads to the other and, without the grace of God, to death and damnation. Hawthorne considered himself a Christian though he doubted that any church could discern the truth. Flannery O'Connor, it seems to this writer, was religiously catholic in the broadest sense of the term. Both believed and wanted to believe, but like most truly religious people they often had terrible doubts. Still they had the courage to ask the question and to look for the answer. While they saw no cause for rejoicing over what they perceived in the hearts of men, neither did they despair. For much of what they saw there they must have understood from pondering their own hearts. Both were isolated, in a sense, themselves. Hawthorne lived in solitude, and Miss O'Connor with death, for many years. Their pessimism would thus seem to be a natural result of their condition of life. Hawthorne feared what he often called his "insulation" and Flannery O'Connor must have



struggled against a sense of disbelief which opposed the attraction the holy had for her. Yet both continued to have that "ferocious hopefulness" which will not permit people confronted with absurdity to say "Absurd!" but compels them to say "God!"<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Alfred Camus quoted in op. cit., p. 271, Note 54.

## SECTION V

### SUMMARY

In this paper an examination of some of the work of Flannery O'Connor has been made. The study was limited to these aspects of her work: her attitude toward her craft and its use to express her philosophy of life; the essence of that philosophy of life; her emergence as a modern Christian writer who used the old devices of allegory and symbol to present her vision of man's situation today; and the nature of some of the imagery and philosophy of her work as compared with those of Nathanael West and Nathaniel Hawthorne.

The following conclusions have been drawn: first, Flannery O'Connor regarded writing not merely as a means of self-expression or earning a living, but as the use of a talent God gave for a purpose; second, the fundamental nature of her religious view of life assures her position as a Christian rather than just a Catholic writer; third, her choice of the grotesque as the artistic means of conveying her sense of life was consonant with this Christian position; and fourth, while her style and technique are as modern as that of her contemporary, the late Nathanael West, her viewpoint and some of the devices she used to present it reveal a definite kinship to Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Two other conclusions distinctly relevant to those above have been reached as a result of the research done in preparing this paper, although exploration of the questions leading to them was beyond its scope. First, the violence so many critics term gratuitous in Flannery O'Connor's work is an unpleasantly inescapable fact of our time. Anyone who reads the newspapers is reminded of it daily. The senseless murders of *The Misfit* were imagined by Miss O'Connor, but those of Smith and Hitchcock were not made up by Truman Capote. James Agee tells us in his Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, a study of some of the same kinds of people that many of Flannery O'Connor's stories deal with, "I can only say that in the people of this country . . . you must reckon in traits, needs, diseases, and above all, mere natural habits, of a casualness, apathy, self-interest, unconscious, offhand, and deliberated cruelty . . . terrible enough to freeze your blood or to break your heart . . ." Agee was writing of poor sharecroppers in the South, but his words apply equally to corresponding classes of slumdweller and others in our cities. And among them, unfortunately, violence is very often gratuitous. For this reason, though one may object to descriptions of shocking incidents in fiction, the objection is no basis for valid literary criticism. As Henry James said, the artist must be granted his *donnee*.

Finally, Flannery O'Connor is undoubtedly a minor

writer. She does what she does brilliantly, but her range is narrow. Her two novels tell essentially the same story,



and there is a great deal of repetition in the short stories. Despite a few misjudgments in craft, however, she was a master of Poe's "single effect," and her vision cut deep.

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