

FLANNERY O'CONNOR: PROPHET IN THE WILDERNESS

by

Dannette Marie Sullivan

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I dedicate this thesis
to my family,
with much love and appreciation

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SIGNATURE PAGE

This thesis for honors recognition has been approved for the
Department of English by:

Henry E. Burgess

Mr. Henry E. Burgess, M.A.
Chairman, Department of English

C. Edward Robins

Rev. C. Edward Robins, S.T.L.
Instructor, Department of Theology

Sister Miriam Clare, O.S.F.

Sister Miriam Clare Roesler, O.S.F., Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Department of English

April 10, 1972

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INTRODUCTION

As one surveys the gamut of contemporary American literature, one frequently mentioned name is that of Flannery O'Connor. She is a widely discussed contemporary writer -- and yet one of the most misinterpreted and misunderstood.

When Miss O'Connor died in 1964 at only thirty-nine years of age, she had achieved a substantial reputation as a fiction writer, despite her limited canon of works. She authored only two novels, Wise Blood and The Violent Bear It Away, and two collections of short stories, A Good Man Is Hard To Find and Everything That Rises Must Converge. Also included are an unfinished novel, Why Do Heathens Rage? and a few uncollected short stories and essays.

On the basis of this relatively small amount of material, one would not be able to claim that Flannery O'Connor is a major modern writer. But according to Carter W. Martin, a critic who has done extensive work on the writing of Miss O'Connor, "the quality of her fiction is such that she must be considered an extremely important minor writer of national, even international importance."¹

All critics are not so kind as Martin however. Because of the strange, often terrifying texture of her fiction, the reviewers, as well as the general reading public have been genuinely confused about Flannery O'Connor.

¹Carter W. Martin, The True Country (Kingsport, Tennessee: Kingsport Press, Inc., 1969), p. 4.

A major difficulty inhered in her Southern heritage and her Roman Catholic faith. Immediately, she was stereotyped; she was labeled a "typical" example of the "Southern School," or a Catholic who turned against her religion.

However, when one carefully examines the writing of Flannery O'Connor, it becomes unmistakably clear that these two elements combine to help produce her finely-wrought, complex literary contribution. For, as Miss O'Connor herself stated: "the business of fiction is to embody mystery through manners..."²

The fiction of Miss O'Connor is only comprehensible when it is discussed in religious terms. She herself said: "I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and that what I see in the world I see in its relation to that."³

Further, by integrating the Southern code of manners she knew so well with her deep-seated religious vision, she paints a portrait of contemporary man, faced with the profound choice of accepting God's redemptive grace or rejecting Him to take the side of the Devil.

The picture she paints is a vivid one, wrought by a skillful artist. Her own particular style, her tremendous descriptive ability,

²Robert and Sally Fitzgerald (eds.), Mystery and Manners (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969), p. 124.

³Granville Hicks (ed.), The Living Novel: A Symposium (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1957), p. 162.

her finely-drawn characters, her frightening, sometimes confusing use of the grotesque, and finally, her sense of humor, at times grim, but always amusing -- all these combine intricately with her mystical vision to present the reader with a masterful piece of prose.

It will be our purpose here then to examine the work of Flannery O'Connor in three parts: we will briefly review significant facets of her life; secondly, we will discuss various individual elements of her successful short story art, which she handles with outstanding technical skill; and finally, we will move to our major task, the task of delving into the heart of Miss O'Connor's fiction to examine what we will call her "mystical vision."

In order to analyze her "vision" in depth, we will focus on a short story which appears in her second collection, Everything That Rises Must Converge, entitled "The Lame Shall Enter First." It is essentially the story of a well-meaning widower, Sheppard, who neglects his own son, Norton, mainly because an older boy, Rufus Johnson, club-footed and criminal, seems much more in need of help; the consequence is Norton's suicide. This story, one of Miss O'Connor's most representative and most successful, will readily illustrate the author as a modern-day "prophet in the wilderness."

One critic stated about O'Connor's work: "The reader is often unwillingly fascinated, an uneasy blend of attraction to and repulsion from her fiction, which springs from uncertainty about the moral and religious vision concealed in these strangely grotesque

flowerings of her imagination."⁴

It is my personal hope that the reader will seriously allow himself to be fascinated by the fiction of Flannery O'Connor. Read it, take the time to plumb the depths of it, and finally, if you feel it is warranted, make a personal application of her intense "moral and religious vision."

⁴Ruth M. Vande Kieft, "Judgment in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor," Sewanee Review, 76(Spring, 1968), 337.

CHAPTER I

HER LIFE

Mary Flannery O'Connor was born on March 25, 1925 in Savannah, Georgia. She spent her childhood years there, but when it was discovered in 1938 that her father was ill with incurable lupus, the family moved to Milledgeville, Georgia. After graduation from Peabody High School in 1942, Flannery enrolled in Georgia State College for Women. There she edited the literary magazine, "The Corinthian," was feature editor of the yearbook, and art editor of the newspaper. Although she did contribute some fiction to the college publication, she was still interested primarily in cartooning.

However, a perceptive teacher had submitted some of her stories to the Writers' Workshop of the University of Iowa, so after graduation from Georgia State with a Bachelor of Arts degree in social science, Flannery received a Rinehart Fellowship and consequently spent two years in Paul Engle's class in creative writing at the University of Iowa.

Flannery began to work hard at fiction writing and her efforts paid off in 1946 when her first story was published in Accent. After receiving a Master of Fine Art's degree from Iowa in 1947, she spent a season at the writer's colony at Yaddo in Saratoga Springs, New York.

Such magazines as Partisan Review, Kenyon Review, Sewanee Review, and Harper's Bazaar readily published her first stories; but according to Caroline Gordon: "Getting them read -- the way every serious

fiction writer wants his work read -- was another matter. Her first stories met with the same incomprehension which William Faulkner's early work encountered."⁵

In 1951, Flannery was taken seriously ill with what was diagnosed as disseminated lupus, the same blood vessel disease that had killed her father only nine years before. She was pulled through this initial onset and the disease was arrested for a time. After being released from the hospital, Flannery and her mother moved to "Andalusia," a dairy farm outside of Milledgeville, where she was to spend her most productive writing years.

She had been working on her first novel for several years. Wise Blood was finally published in May, 1952, and as her close friend Robert Fitzgerald said, "the reviewers, by and large, didn't know what to make of it."⁶ Even her relatives and friends were puzzled by this strange book. With the wit that was to become one of the characteristics of her fiction, Flannery writes to Fitzgerald:

My current literary assignment (from my mother) is to write an introduction for Cousin Katie 'so she won't be shocked,' to be pasted on the inside of her book. This piece has to be in the tone of the Sacred Heart Messenger and carry the burden of critical contemporary thought. I keep putting it off.⁷

⁵Caroline Gordon, "Heresy in Dixie," Sewanee Review, 76(Spring, 1968), 267.

⁶Robert Fitzgerald, from Introduction to Everything That Rises Must Converge by Flannery O'Connor (New York: Noonday Press, 1965), p. xviii.

⁷Ibid., p. xxii.

Flannery was very serious about her writing, however, and followed a definite working schedule. She said, "I write from nine to twelve and spend the rest of the day recuperating from it."⁸ One of her most interesting methods of recuperation was to tend to the exotic fowl that she had raised from the time she was a small child. Peacocks were her great love and in several of her stories, she employs them as symbols.

Miss O'Connor received a number of honors and awards during her lifetime. In 1952, she received a Kenyon Review Fellowship, and in 1954 she was reappointed a Kenyon Fellow. After she was notified of this, she said, again in her typical way, "So that means the Rockefellers (the Foundation supplied funds for the fellowships) 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..."⁹ Grants from the National Academy of Arts and Letters and the Ford Foundation, as well as an honorary degree from Smith College and first prize in the O. Henry short story collection contest also numbered among Miss O'Connor's recognitions.

Either the lupus or the drug that controlled it caused her bones to deteriorate, so from 1954 on, she used crutches to get around. In a letter to a friend she joked, "As the niggers say, I have the misery."¹⁰

⁸ Granville Hicks, "Writer At Home With Her Heritage," Saturday Review, 45(May 12, 1962), 22.

⁹ Fitzgerald, from Introduction to Everything That Rises Must Converge, p. xxi.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. xix.

The "misery" however, did not seem to slow her down to any degree. In late 1955, A Good Man Is Hard To Find, her first collection of short stories, went into its third printing. She worked on her second novel, The Violent Bear It Away from 1958 until it was eventually published in May, 1960.

Flannery O'Connor died on August 3, 1964, a victim of the disease that had crippled her. At the time of her death, she was compiling a second collection of short stories, Everything That Rises Must Converge. A third novel, Why Do Heathens Rage?, was left unfinished. Many of the unpublished essays and lectures, as well as a number of critical articles that appeared in scattered publications throughout her lifetime, were eventually gathered and edited by Robert and Sally Fitzgerald, and published under the title Mystery and Manners.

Flannery O'Connor was a most interesting personage. As one critic stated:

Though the vicissitudes of her own life might well have made her bitter, she did not seem to be so; nor for that matter did she appear to be 'smiling through.' She seemed rather to have turned on her own life the same searching glare she gave the world in her fiction, found what was good, what bad, and accepted it all as reality.¹¹

A close personal friend of hers remarked: "In her personal life, Miss O'Connor is warm and pleasant, with a soft Southern drawl,

¹¹Robert Drake, "The Harrowing Evangelism of Flannery O'Connor," Christian Century, 81(September 30, 1964), 1202.

but nobody will ever guess it from her stories."¹²

One is able to grasp from her stories, however, the superior command which Flannery O'Connor holds over the elements that help to shape her masterful prose.

¹²"Frustrated Preacher," Newsweek, 39(May 19, 1952), 114.

CHAPTER II

ELEMENTS OF HER FICTION

The technical skill of Flannery O'Connor as a writer of fiction is obvious. She handles the standard elements of a short story most skillfully. The Christian vision that is the essence of her writing of necessity must be woven into some sort of a framework; this framework, composed of the individual elements which help to shape a good piece of fiction, appear generally in O'Connor's fiction, and specifically in "The Lame Shall Enter First."

The style of Miss O'Connor is a simple, uncluttered one. Her powerful theme is dressed in most unassuming apparel. The use of the exact, commonly-understood word, the direct, uncomplicated sentence, could lead the uninitiated reader to believe that Miss O'Connor is merely relaying a tale about Southern folk. But as one realizes the dimension and intent of her effort, it becomes clear that this terseness, this simple direct style, is a most effective vehicle for carrying the message she brings.

Miss O'Connor once stated that:

...the first and most obvious characteristic of fiction is that it deals with reality through what can be seen, heard, smelt, tasted, and touched. . .The fiction writer has to realize that he can't create compassion with compassion, or emotion with emotion, or thought with thought. He has to provide all these things with a body; he has to create a world with weight and extension.¹³

¹³Fitzgerald, Mystery and Manners, p. 91-92.

And create a world with weight and extension she does. By the use of specific details, concrete images, and exact sensations, the reader can place himself right next to Sheppard as he "sat on a stool at the bar that divided the kitchen in half, eating his cereal out of the individual pasteboard box it came in;" or next to Rufus as he "sat on the bed and peeled an orange, letting the peeling drop in the bed, spitting the seeds out in front of him, and finally wiping his hands on the sheet..." The reader can appreciate all the implications these statements have for the development of the characters and the movement of the story because the situations are something with which he can readily identify. This portrayal of the "real world" is most essential to Miss O'Connor's purpose; for if the reader can dismiss the scene as being unreal, "something that doesn't happen," he can also dismiss the concrete presence of God's grace in the world and the necessity of either accepting it or rejecting it as something unreal, simply the figment of a fertile imagination.

Miss O'Connor's power of description is outstanding. As she once wrote to a fledgling writer:

The fiction writer is concerned with the way the world looks first of all. You should know what a character looks like before you go into his head and say what he is thinking about. Begin with the outside and when you have the outside established, then you can go into a person's head.¹¹

¹¹Sister Mary Alice, "My Mentor, Flannery O'Connor," Saturday Review, 48 (May 29, 1965), 24.

By careful choice of the best possible noun or adjective and the use of the metaphor and the simile, Miss O'Connor paints a picture for her reader that is easily duplicated on the canvas of the mind's eye.

Let us look, for example, to Leola, Sheppard's cook:

The colored girl was at the closet taking off a bright red raincoat. She was a tall light-yellow girl with a mouth like a large rose that had darkened and wilted. Her hair was dressed in tiers on top of her head and leaned to the side like the Tower of Pisa.

In most cases, Miss O'Connor presents not only a vivid image, but through choice of word and detail, transmits an attitude, a feeling, something about the essence of the person or thing described. For example, shortly after we meet Sheppard, and learn he is a Saturday counselor at the reformatory, we catch a glimpse of his office there. "...it was a narrow closet with one window and a small table and two chairs in it. He had never been inside a confessional but he thought it must be the same kind of operation he had here..." By the simple inclusion of the word "confessional," with all that the term denotes and connotes, the reader comes to realize that Sheppard sees himself as a type of "Savior," capable of giving a secular "absolution" to those delinquents with whom he confers.

When Rufus first appears at Sheppard's home, we see "...a thin, bony-faced boy in a wet black suit...His hair was flattened to his skull by the rain. He stood there like an irate drenched crow. His look went through the child (Norton) like a pin and paralyzed him." From the moment we first see him for ourselves, we realize that Rufus is a strange fellow indeed, who will eventually be quite powerful

within the walls of his new abode.

For her works to be truly understood, the setting of Flannery O'Connor must be examined, for it is in the South that all her works are grounded. Said Miss O'Connor: "I'm pleased to be a member of my particular family and to live in Baldwin County in the sovereign State of Georgia, and to see what I can see from here. Where I am seems to me a great base for the imagination."¹⁵

Miss O'Connor repeated frequently that the business of fiction is "to embody mystery through manners."¹⁶ Thus, it is not because she is a fierce provincial that she is so attached to the South, but rather because the South serves a primary function for her. The Southern code of manners, so familiar to her, provides her as a storyteller with a clearly defined background of convention. The actions of her characters are carried on in a very real situation.

A second dimension emerges when the religious notion is included. As was stated earlier, although Flannery O'Connor was herself a Roman Catholic, she wrote primarily about Protestants from the South. She added a great deal of light to the subject when she elaborated on this idea in an interview with Granville Hicks.¹⁷

¹⁵Gerard E. Sherry, "An Interview With Flannery O'Connor," Critic, 21(July, 1963), 29.

¹⁶Fitzgerald, Mystery and Manners, p. 124.

¹⁷Hicks, "Writer At Home With Her Heritage," p. 22.

She said that any Southern writer has two great advantages. The first is his knowledge and love of the Bible. She feels that the Bible is still a great power in the South -- the so-called "Bible Belt" of the United States. So, Holy Scripture is a useful tool indeed when it is so much an integral part of a Southerner's life.

The second advantage she sees lies in the fact that the South has a vivid sense of history. Southerners remember so painfully the loss of the Civil War -- the "Fall of the South," that this conception can be broadened to include the "Fall of Man." The Southern forces in the War Between the States fought a bloody battle, convinced they would be victorious. Yet in the end their adversary crushed them -- the South fell. This is a notion that is part of a Southerner's heritage. So when Miss O'Connor speaks of man's struggle with Christ and his eventual defeat -- man's fall before God -- it is simply an extension of a well-understood historical event.

So we see man's lifelong struggle with God grounded in a setting where religion and struggle and downfall are common notions. The native country of Flannery O'Connor provided the groundwork, then, for the cosmic implications of her work. What is seen on a local level by a few can be easily applied on the cosmic level to Everyman.

Any discussion of the work of Flannery O'Connor must, of necessity, include her use of the grotesque, her "Gothic impulse."¹⁸

¹⁸ Martin, The True Country, p. 153.

This particular element is one of the most widely dealt with -- and often the most misunderstood aspect of O'Connor's writing.

Because of her extensive use of the grotesque, Miss O'Connor is often included as a member of the "School of the Grotesque," or the "School of Southern Gothic." However, she herself did not take too kindly to such categorical generalizations. She stated, in one of her essays, that the use of these terms "conjures up an image of Gothic monstrosities and the idea of a preoccupation with everything deformed and grotesque. Most of us are considered to be unhappy combinations of Poe and Erskine Caldwell."¹⁹

Just what part then, does the Gothic play in the work of Flannery O'Connor? Certainly its existence cannot be denied, for it is too pervasive in her stories.

Perhaps the best way to begin is to examine the terms "Gothic" and "grotesque" and to clear up any misunderstanding about their meaning. Carter W. Martin,²⁰ makes some useful clarifications. First, he says that it is often erroneously assumed that "Gothic" identifies only that literature which seeks to shock readers gratuitously, to frighten and terrify them only for the purpose of titillation. As a matter of fact, the best Gothic fiction conveys themes which are congruent with the method of terror, striking a balance between manner and thematic content. A second point which

¹⁹Fitzgerald, Mystery and Manners, p. 28.

²⁰Martin, The True Country, p. 153.

Martin discusses is the mistaken notion that grotesqueness is the equivalent of Gothicism; he feels it is not. Grotesqueness, according to Martin, is some deviation from an explicit or implicit norm and may reside in physical attributes, actions, or situations. It may be simply verisimilitude or rhetorical overstatement; but when its intention is to promote a feeling of revulsion or terror, it is a textual necessity of Gothic fiction.

Thus Flannery O'Connor often employs grotesqueness without using the other Gothic features. For example, she shows us a young girl in "Revelation," whose face is "blue with acne" or a dead man in The Violent Bear It Away who sits upright at the breakfast table, staring at the opposite wall. She uses it for the purpose of shocking her audience, but does not sustain this atmosphere, nor use it as an end in itself. As Martin says: ". . . when the ugly and distorted are not used as literary adornment, the grotesque becomes a thematic contribution to the narrative. . ." ²¹

And use of the grotesque does play an integral part in Miss O'Connor's fiction. She uses it to get the attention of her audience, to startle them, to jar awake minds that are calloused with indifference and rationalism. For her the grotesque is a technical device "made necessary by the difficulties of expressing a Christian vision to an increasingly non-Christian world." ²²

²¹Ibid., p. 154.

²²Albert Griffith, "Flannery O'Connor," America, 113(November 27, 1965), 674.

Although grotesqueness is subtly employed in numerous instances in "The Lame Shall Enter First," the more outstanding examples will suffice to illustrate this characteristic.

Rufus, one of the major figures, is presented as physically grotesque for a definite purpose. "He lifted a monstrous club foot to his knee. The foot was in a heavy black battered shoe with a sole four or five inches thick. The leather parted from it in one place and the end of an empty sock protruded like a grey tongue from a severed head." This description of his grotesque physical appearance is functional in that it leads the reader to imagine Rufus' moral depravity.

Norton's ugliness is less physical than a matter of action, largely traceable to his father's rejection of him. He is first seen eating a disgusting breakfast of stale cake with peanut butter and catsup, while his father, preoccupied with the sight of Rufus eating out of a garbage can, looks on without objection. Sheppard then lectures the child on his selfishness. When he mentions the child's mother, he tells the boy not to grieve over losing her, but to be grateful that his mother is not in the penitentiary. This insensitivity to the boy's grief causes an outburst of weeping, but Sheppard continues to berate his son for what he felt was selfishness. When he suggests Rufus' need for a new shoe, Norton vomits and "waits with his mouth open over the plate as if he expected his heart to come up next."

Thus, this grotesque, indeed physically-repulsive description, points out quite unmistakably something of the character of the boy

and his father and something of their relationship.

One final element which Flannery O'Connor employs that cannot be overlooked is that of humor. In her personal life, she was delighted by humor and had an abundant talent for it, according to her many friends and acquaintances. Miss O'Connor's humor runs the gamut from cartooning to dry irony. It comes naturally from a thorough knowledge of the people about whom she writes.

On the one hand, she is definitely aware of the presence of evil in the world, the frailty of human nature, and man's constant struggle to rise above his short-comings. She displays this imperfection through laughter; the individual laughs most at himself and his faults.

Oftentimes, however, her humor must be classified as grim. An essentially grotesque or revolting situation calls forth laughter which eventually dwindles into astonishment that pathos and horror should be funny. Said one critic: "Her humor...is genuinely funny, but it usually carries within it deep, haunting tragedy. We shudder as we laugh."²³

Let us examine a few instances from "The Lame Shall Enter First." Often a simple remark employing the sharp wit of Rufus is used to make Sheppard laugh in spite of himself. "Where's your probation officer?" Sheppard asked. "I ain't supposed to keep up with him," Johnson said, "He's supposed to keep up with me."

²³Jean Marie Kann, O.S.F., "Everything That Rises Must Converge," Catholic World, 204(December, 1966), 159.

And in another instance, after Rufus refused to wear the corrective shoe Sheppard had had specially made, Sheppard muttered to the clerk: "Wrap it (the shoe) up. . .I had thought he was less of a child." The boy leered. "You been wrong before," he said.

Finally, we have an example of O'Connor's use of grim humor when we see Rufus invade Norton's dead mother's bedroom and rummage through her drawers:

He pulled up a wrinkled red polka dot blouse and dropped it back. Then he pulled out a green silk kerchief and whirled it over his head and let it float to the floor. His hand continued to plow deep into the drawer. After a moment it came up gripping a faded corset with four dangling metal supporters; 'Thisyer must be her saddle,' he observed. He lifted it gingerly and shook it. Then he fastened it around his waist and jumped up and down, making the metal supporters dance. He began to snap his fingers and turn his hips from side to side. 'Gonter rock, rattle, and roll,' he sang. 'Gonter rock, rattle, and roll. Can't please that woman, to save my doggone soul.' He began to move around, stamping the good foot down and slinging the heavy one to the side. He danced out the door, past the stricken child and down the hall toward the kitchen.

These few examples illustrate Flannery O'Connor's unmistakable technical skill as a writer of fiction. To truly understand and appreciate the core of O'Connor's writing, however, a lengthy examination of her "mystical vision" is imperative.

CHAPTER III

HER MYSTICAL VISION

"There is a divinity that shapes our ends, rough hew them how we may." (Hamlet, William Shakespeare). Perhaps there is no statement better able to sum up the actual heart of the fiction of Flannery O'Connor. The world of Miss O'Connor revolves essentially around this "divinity," which for her is found in the person of Jesus Christ. Stated one critic: "If there is no central mystery in Christ, then for O'Connor there would be no mystery in life."²⁴

Let us examine her whole battery of writing. One may read her work on a literal level and simply conclude that this is a young woman who composes interesting things -- a bit strange and unreal perhaps -- but interesting nonetheless. However, to appreciate truly the dynamic thrust of Miss O'Connor, the reader must willingly rise above the literal level to the anagogical, for her work is understandable only in a religious context.

In the framework of the Incarnation and Redemption, she is concerned with man's life-long struggle with God. Her essential dilemma is to present the message of Christian redemption to a society which refuses to take it seriously. She was perceptive enough to realize that a traditional religious story would not do. Today's society simply pays no heed to writing which overtly expounds and interprets Christian values. So, rather than render what she saw

²⁴J. O. Smith, "Ritual and Violence in Flannery O'Connor," Thought, 41(Winter, 1966), 552.

as this central mystery of life in a sermon-like fashion, she intricately weaves concrete dramatic theme with moral vision, drawing life as she sees it, and leaving the explicit moral and theological lesson to be drawn by the reader. In fact, this is done so skillfully that many times the reader who is unfamiliar with O'Connor simply passes over the work without touching the real meaning of the story. Said one critic: "That her works are highly moral and constructed within the Christian frame of reference, no one will deny; but it requires a certain skill to see through the individual to the symbol, beyond the sensational to the spiritual."²⁵

Flannery O'Connor was herself a very religious person -- a Christian and specifically, a staunch Roman Catholic. However, there is nothing obviously Roman Catholic about her writing. There are no priests, no angels, no sweetness and light. In fact, in most O'Connor stories, we are made aware of the Roman Church by its absence. "She sought to use her belief as the light by which she saw, making her religion implicit in her vision rather than explicitly intrusive in her work."²⁶

Her religious themes then are enunciated in the context of a fundamentalistic religious theology. Rather than a Catholic outlook, we see almost that of the American Calvinist with absolute denial of

²⁵ Sister Rose Alice, S.S.J., "Poet To The Outcaste," Renascence, 16(Spring, 1964), 126.

²⁶ "Dust For Art's Sake," Time, 93(May 30, 1969), 70.

free will, insistence upon brutal, bloody, and even catastrophic experience of faith, and the eclipsing of New Testament joy and affirmation with Old Testament wrath.

The major vehicles Flannery O'Connor uses for bringing to life man's struggle with God are her precisely drawn characters. She makes the reader see and hear the character before he is asked to understand him. Then the reader becomes truly involved in his encounter and subsequent struggle with God and the Devil, with Good and Evil.

O'Connor uses only a few major characters in each work. For our purposes, all major figures in her fiction may be grouped into either of two categories: the rebel-prophets and the antagonists.

The rebel-prophet is an unlovely creator, often with a physical defect which is the counterpart of a moral one. He seems bad in every sense. He breaks the laws of both God and men. But he is obsessed somehow with an "ultimate concern." He seems to be possessed by God and the Devil at war. His God is the God of the Old Testament viewed in his own warped way -- the God of wrath, vengeance, justice, with no love, mercy, or compassion. He fights this God, and wants to perform an anti-gospel. But he is somehow presented as a man of God -- the unwilling and often unwitting container and conveyor of God's truth and grace. The rebel-prophet is exemplified in the "Misfit," the mass murderer from "A Good Man Is Hard To Find;" Shiftlet, the man who marries an idiot child and abandons her in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own;" and Rufus, the delinquent in

"The Lame Shall Enter First," whom we shall later examine at greater length.

The antagonist is of several different types. Sister Mariella Gable²⁷ divides them into four groups: the rationalist, who claims to have no illusions, who trusts reason and science to the exclusion of revelation; the humanist, who is a "professional do-gooder, a hollow tin-Jesus;" the psychologist, who thinks that pinning a pseudo-scientific label onto experience fully explains it; and finally, the quantifier, who pins his faith to tests of intelligence, aptitude, and preference, and feels that one discovers truth by inspecting questionnaires. Thus these antagonists are intellectual, social, and religious liberals, with either an openly scornful or quietly cynical attitude toward religion. They are highly educated and thought of as respectable and enlightened persons. They appear to be superior to the "religious" man -- the rebel-prophet. Yet in the course of the story, every virtue and merit of these atheists is shown to be totally useless as a means to self-understanding and their soul's salvation.

So we witness the conflict which arises from the clash of the rebel-prophet and the antagonist. We see the rebel-prophet, who, as we stated earlier, is often the unwilling and unwitting conveyor of God's truth and grace, confront the godless antagonist who refuses to worship anything but the material world and who refuses to accept

²⁷Sister Mariella Gable, O.S.B., "Ecumenic Core in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction," American Benedictine Review, 15(June, 1964), 135.

anything that his intellect cannot grasp and classify.

We come then to the crux of the matter -- to quote Miss O'Connor in an essay "On Her Own Work:" "the action of grace in a territory held largely by the devil."²⁸ This "grace" of which she speaks is redemptive grace. As one expert says: "Christ died for all men and the grace of redemption flows through channels both regular and irregular."²⁹

Thus we have initially a character in a corrupting human situation. He lives "in a territory held largely by the devil." At one particular point in the story, this character has a moment of vision -- a moment when this redemptive grace is held out to him. Says Miss O'Connor, "There is a moment in every great story in which the presence of grace can be felt as it waits to be accepted or rejected, even though though the reader may not recognize this moment."³⁰

This moment of vision, of divine revelation, is often brought about by or accompanied by violence, even death. Miss O'Connor feels that this violent act -- be it the theft of Hulga's wooden leg by the Bible Salesman in "Good Country People" or the murder of the Grandmother in "A Good Man Is Hard To Find," or the goading of Mrs.

²⁸ Fitzgerald, Mystery and Manners, p. 118.

²⁹ Sister Bertrande, "Four Stories of Flannery O'Connor," Thought, 37(Fall, 1962), 425.

³⁰ Fitzgerald, Mystery and Manners, p. 118.

May by the bull in "Greenleaf" -- this violence is strangely capable of returning characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace.

But whatever the case, the character must make a choice -- he must decide between serving the Devil, who in most of O'Connor's stories is presented as quite real, or being a disciple of Almighty God. And "there is no room in O'Connor for a systematic, refined, rational acceptance of God. The experience must be devastating and terrible; life must be changed, the will must surrender itself completely."³¹

So this religious vision in Flannery O'Connor is markedly apocalyptic. All of life's experiences lead to death -- most often death of one of the major figures or of someone close to him; death in turn leads to revelation. Death often awakens the character to reality; it "baptizes" him into awareness.

Finally then, as one critic sums it up, "...we are not to despair at death. The reader's task is to examine the manner and circumstances of her character's death, for death often provides the only hope..."³²

Let us move then to one of Miss O'Connor's most representative and successful works in order to illuminate these general notions

³¹Smith, "Ritual and Violence in Flannery O'Connor," p. 559.

³²Joan Brittain and Leon Driskell, "O'Connor and the Eternal Crossroads," Renaissance, 22(Fall, 1969), 55.

with a concrete example. "The Lame Shall Enter First," as was earlier stated, is on the surface, the story of a well-meaning widower, Sheppard, who neglects his own son Norton, mainly because an older boy, Rufus Johnson, clubfooted and criminal, seems much more in need of help; the consequence is Norton's suicide. However, as we probe more deeply, we find that this story presents to us a moral and theological lesson; it does indeed concern man's struggle with God.

Miss O'Connor employs only two major characters, as well as one "sub-major" character (Norton), and several incidental people who merely fill in the scene. The first of the major figures -- Rufus Johnson -- may be classified as a rebel-prophet. Rufus, with "steel-colored eyes trained narrowly forward," had a "monstrous club foot" which corresponds to his moral depravity. When the reader first meets Rufus, he finds he is an inmate at a reformatory, having been charged with such things as smashing windows, slashing tires, setting trash boxes ablaze. After being asked by Sheppard in a counseling session what made him do all these things, he replied: "Satan...He has me in his power."

More evidence of Rufus' apparent feeling of being possessed by the devil appears when we examine a conversation that takes place one night when Sheppard, Norton, and Rufus are looking through a telescope Sheppard had purchased to widen Rufus' intellectual horizons. Rufus states that rather than going to the moon, he is

going "to hell." When he speaks of hell, Norton wants to know if his mother, who had died a few years previously, is there. Said Rufus: "...she is if she was evil. Was she a whore?" After receiving a vehement "No," he asked: "Did she believe in Jesus?" "She did all the time," replied Norton. Rufus simply said, "She's saved...and she's on high." Finally, when Norton asked where he'd go when he died, Rufus answered: "Right now you'd go where she is, but if you live long enough, you'll go to hell."

Later we learn more about the spiritual feeling of Rufus when, after he has been reprimanded for stealing a Bible, he says: "It don't make any difference about me. I'm going to hell anyway...unless I repent." And to prove his belief in the Scriptures, we see Rufus tear a page from the Bible and actually eat it in front of Sheppard.

Thus we have this rebel-prophet, who, although he seems basically evil, will eventually confront Sheppard with the mystery of God's truth and grace.

On the other hand, we have Sheppard, the antagonist. He is essentially a combination of the humanist, "the professional do-gooder" and the rationalist, who trusts reason and science to the exclusion of revelation. We are told that on Saturday Sheppard "worked at the reformatory as a counselor, receiving nothing for it but the satisfaction of knowing he was helping boys no one else cared about." Yet he neglected his own son, Norton, whom he termed "selfish" and "mediocre" because he was not interested in those things his father

felt were most important. Sheppard took an interest in Rufus initially because of Rufus' high I.Q. "I want to see you make the most of your intelligence." Yet when Rufus made mention of religion, Sheppard "felt a momentary dull despair as if he were faced with some elemental warping of nature that had happened too long ago to be corrected now...Rubbish! he snorted." Thus we see Sheppard's scornful rejection of religion and his complete faith in matters of the intellect. He felt he was going to be Rufus' "savior." Yet Rufus hissed, "Save yourself. Nobody can save me but Jesus."

Thus is established the conflict between Rufus, the rebel-prophet and Sheppard, the antagonist. And in this story, as in many of O'Connor's other works, the rebel-prophet is the instrument through which redemptive grace is offered to the antagonist.

At the beginning of his relationship with Rufus, Sheppard was quite content in trying to "save" Rufus by training and channeling his intellect. Rufus summed up quite precisely Sheppard's attitude toward himself when he said to Norton, "God, kid, how do you stand it. He thinks he's Jesus Christ."

When Rufus first tried to convince Norton of heaven and hell in Sheppard's presence, Sheppard tried to handle it with "gentle ridicule;" he attempted to refute Rufus' belief with rational and logical argument, but he proved quite unsuccessful in the eyes of the two boys. In fact, when Sheppard tried to buy a new corrective shoe for Rufus' club foot, Rufus refused to wear it. In effect, he refused to rid himself of his old belief, of his obsession with God and Satan.

The presence of grace is first noticeable after the argument Sheppard and Rufus had concerning salvation. Rufus had stated: "Nobody can save me but Jesus," to which Sheppard retorted curtly: "You don't deceive me. I flushed that out of your head in the reformatory. I saved you from that, at least." After this, "the boy's eyes were like distorting mirrors in which he (Sheppard) saw himself made hideous and grotesque." "I'll show you," Rufus whispered. But Sheppard wanted nothing more to do with the rebel-prophet and his offer of grace. "The intensity had gone out of Sheppard's eyes. They looked flat and lifeless as if the shock of the boy's revelation were only now reaching the center of his consciousness. 'If only he would leave,' he murmured." Sheppard wished he had never been faced with the monumental task of accepting or rejecting God. "He longed for the time when there was no one but himself and Norton in the house, when the child's simple selfishness would be all he had to contend with, and his own loneliness."

In the closing pages of the story, the crucial moment comes when Rufus, who was arrested for the third time, was brought to Sheppard, where Rufus brutally attacked him for the last time: "He thinks he's God...The Devil has him in his power. He don't know his left hand from his right...He's a dirty atheist...When I get ready to be saved, Jesus'll save me, not that lying, stinking, atheist..."

Suddenly, after Rufus was hauled away, Sheppard began to come to a realization. He repeated, "I have nothing to reproach myself

with...I did more for him than I did for my own child." As he repeated the statement over and over, a light was beginning to dawn. His baptism into reality was beginning.

Slowly his face drained of color...His mouth twisted and he closed his eyes against the revelation. Norton's face rose before him...His heart constricted with a repulsion for himself so clear and intense that he gasped for breath. He had stuffed his own emptiness with good works like a glutton. He had ignored his own child to feed his vision of himself.

Suddenly true awareness dawns on him. "A rush of agonizing love for the child rushed over him like a transfusion of life. The little boy's face appeared to him transformed; the image of his salvation; all light." Just as Sheppard opens his arms to accept the redemptive grace of Christ and become his disciple, he finds that life ahead will not be a simple path paved with sweetness and light. For as he ran up the stairs to embrace Norton and shower him with his newly realized love, he saw that "the tripod had fallen and the telescope lay on the floor. A few feet over it, the child hung in the jungle of shadows, just below the beam from which he had launched his flight into space."

Thus we see the clearly apocalyptic religious vision of Flannery O'Connor. Everything in life led to death; death in turn led to revelation. Sheppard finally was baptized into awareness.

In conclusion we must determine the final effect of Norton's death. The child Norton had accepted Christ's message, preached through Rufus, wholeheartedly, and his suicide was committed with the complete faith that he would be united with his mother "on high."

Thus death for him was a release from his earthly bonds.

Sheppard, on the other hand, had accepted his revelation just a bit too late to correct his mistaken treatment of his son. Yet, with the Christian doctrine of hope in mind, we have reason to believe that because Sheppard had accepted his revelation, he would live the rest of his life in union with Christ in the light of His Redemption. He had finally made his choice and now must live in accordance with that choice.

CONCLUSION

So we conclude a brief glimpse into the art and spirit of Flannery O'Connor. Miss O'Connor is a writer with undeniable skill. She produces fiction of the highest technical quality, interwoven within a Christian framework to produce a profound mystical vision -- the mystical vision that makes her a unique member of the circle of contemporary American writers.

In the final analysis, Flannery O'Connor must be seen as she herself describes one of the characters in her novel The Violent Bear It Away. Indeed, she is a new voice crying in the wilderness, a prophet come "to warn the children of God of the terrible speed of mercy."

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