

中文摘要

本文昭示由于奥康纳出生于天主教家庭，信仰天主教，并且以刻画人物由认识罪恶到寻求救赎的历程为小说的内容，因此评论家对于奥康纳的作品的宗教意图见解不一。

然而在作者看来，宗教，换言之，天主教不过是奥康纳小说浓厚的后现代主义色彩的外衣，其小说与后现代主义一样没有一个明确、清晰的内涵，若将其作品孤立地看作以救赎为目的的宗教小说无疑是片面的。因此本文试图从文本出发，探讨了奥康纳的作品的后现代主义特征。本文主体部分为三章。绪论直接从评论家对奥康纳的作品中的宗教的评论差异谈起，阐明了本文主要来分析奥康纳的作品的后现代主义倾向，并扼要介绍了论文的要旨内核。

第二章：本章着重分析了奥康纳的作品中反复出现的两组对立面的后现代主义内涵：在她的作品中，善与恶、上帝与魔鬼这两组对立面中的每一对立双方并没有绝对的标准，而且是随时颠覆变化的，也就是意义的模糊性和不确定性。因此作者试图通过对这些对立面的考察来阐述奥康纳小说充斥着种种不确定成分。

第三章：本章从奥康纳的创作手法入手，特别是象征以及意象来论述其作品是没有中心、支离破碎的。首先从奥康纳作品中象征手法出发，指出了该手法极大削弱了以救赎为中心主题的传统观点。例如，天空和太阳象征着在其作品中上帝的救助，帽子象征拒绝上帝的救助。然而这两种不同的象征意义的应用在小说主人公身上却并不和谐。他们究竟是否获得救赎没有定论。作者进一步围绕奥康纳作品中的意象，指出其有别于宗教文化中的含义。奥康纳通过机械似的不和谐的家庭关系描绘、动物般的人物刻画、亵渎上帝的描绘以及没有生命的意象来呈现一个杂乱无章的和没有中心的世界。最后作者着重分析奥康纳作品中否定式的语法结构。通过该结构和话语的游戏化，奥康纳试图把人物困在充满不确定性的语言环境中。例如，带有否定意味的连词“但是”的广泛使用暗示人物正处于一个到处是例外和矛盾的环境中。

第四章：本章试图探索上述矛盾和不确定性背后所隐藏的错综复杂的原因。首先，作者赋予奥康纳与天主教作家新的关系：宗教信仰不仅不会成为障碍反而却为作家提供创作小说所必需的深度的洞察力。接着，作者指出奥康纳的基

基督教现实主义与政治性的现实主义并不遥远，于是作者将奥康纳的作品重置于其诞生的历史语境，探讨了奥康纳的作品与二战、民权运动以及南方独特的历史背景的内在联系，点出奥康纳是如何运用基督教现实主义凸现作品的现实色彩。最后，鉴于现代的知识分子在支离破碎、变幻无常的社会中渴望寻找意义和永久的事实，作者进一步考察后现代主义思潮、存在主义及怀疑主义等哲学思想对奥康纳的影响，展现了人物是如何想尽办法消除由于疏远而导致的种种症状。

因此作者从文本出发，探讨了奥康纳的作品的后现代主义倾向以及容易被忽视的历史和政治的一面。本文最后得出结论：奥康纳的小说虽然长期以来划归为宗教小说，但是，事实上其作品以对后现代主义的关注和意义的不确定性而引人瞩目。

关键词：天主教；善/恶；上帝/魔鬼；象征主义；意象；基督教现实主义；后现代主义

Abstract

Flannery O'Connor is an American short story writer, novelist, and essayist. Since O'Connor had identified her belief in Catholicism as well as her preoccupation with religious concerns, a bewildering assortment of interpretations with regard to religion arise. Nevertheless, the author posits that it is more than redemption. A more critical reader can readily discover several passages in her works in which the texts misspeak and dismantle themselves.

This paper consisting of five chapters proposes to make an attempt at a reinterpretation of O'Connor's works in terms of postmodernism features. To assume that her work is merely a monologue on redemption is to see it only in part, to ignore much of its meaning. Religion, or rather, Catholicism is a peculiar way of her constructing stories with the purpose of showing O'Connor's penchant for postmodernism.

First of all, the author illuminates that the intention of writing this paper is for the reinterpretation of O'Connor's stories and initiates her postmodernism concerns escaped from the horizons of critic's attention.

Then, two pairs of opposites are discussed: good/evil & god/devil. The author points out that the two sides of each pair are in confusion as the story develops. In O'Connor's mind, good sometimes may be evil and vice versa. O'Connor even goes a step further by undermining the orthodox binary opposition because she obscures the boundary of each set.

For instance, in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, the "good" grandmother calls just about anyone she wants to please a "a good man". She bemoans, with others, the lack of any real respect or goodness in the present day---people make this complaint all the time. At the same time, she lies, and manipulates, and is generally a pain to everyone---she gets her entire family killed. On the other hand, the "evil" Misfit greeted the whole family politely when he first encountered them. Still, He is well-educated by saying "Lady, would you mind calling them children to sit down by you?" When the grandmother announces that she recognizes her captor, the Misfit

said, "It would have been better for all of you, lady, if you hadn't reckernized me." That is to say, he does not intend to murder them but for self-protection. At the end of the story, the Misfit concludes that the grandmother "would have been a good woman...if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life." Or rather, people must live as though there is somebody there to shoot them every minute to realize their essential displacement and the futility of human actions to remedy the situation. Likewise, God is depicted without compassion in O'Connor's works such as *The Violent Bear It Away*. The presence of the defective child named Bishop introduces at the heart of the story an abiding theological paradox. The problem of reconciling God's mercy with the spectacle of the damaged creature is one that has long occupied the critics' attention. Later, when Young Tarwater takes the role of prophet, he tries to baptize the defective child, but Young Tarwater initially intends to kill, not to save, the child. During his stay in town, he has numerous opportunities to baptize Bishop; but the devil always holds him back. Therefore, O'Connor seems to ask by implication: if God rejects the retarded Bishop, why should he love us?

Later, the perverse symbols around which she structured her works are presented. The use of the same symbol differs from one character to another. In addition, the meaning of the symbol is inconsistent. Furthermore, the author postulates that the images, like her symbols and style, become instead antithetical in meaning for the majority of the Catholic and Christian cultural community. O'Connor's world is peopled with her autocratic images of disharmony in family relationships, animalistic portraits of humanity, blasphemous and sacrilegious portrayals, and inanimate images. The author introduces that O'Connor's attempt to connect the natural with the supernatural is minimalized by her use of images that receive little impact structurally. The author also observes that although O'Connor may expect that the images in texts will evoke associations with God and religion, the intended force is mitigated due to her choice of lifeless materials and objects, the landscape image and the imagery of death and destruction by examining her stories. At last, the grammar of negation comes under scrutiny. Through grammatical structures and word play O'Connor encases her characters in an off-center language environment. For example, the

negative coordinate conjunction “but” subtly implies an environment where exceptions or contradictions flourish.

Finally, the intertwined hidden reasons for the mentioned discrepancies will be discussed and explored. First, the author endeavors to shed a new light on O’Connor’s relations with the Catholic writer. It is said that belief in Christian dogma is a hindrance to a writer, but O’Connor have found nothing further from the truth. Actually, it frees the storyteller to observe. Belief, in her view, was an instrument for “penetrating reality,” not for molding it, and the Catholic novel was nothing more or less than one in which the truth as Christians know it has been used as a light to see the world by. Even a causal reader must become aware of these “added dimensions” in her work.... Second, the author illuminates the connections between O’Connor and Christian realism. Christian realism and political “realism” were never far apart in the years following World War II. As a consequence, the author’s special attention is devoted to the postwar texts, the Civil Rights Movement and the South during O’Connor’s time. This part analyses and reveals how the real historical events commit foray into O’Connor’s creations. At last, given the fact that modern intellectuals struggle for significance and permanence in a world of alienation, fragmentation and transience, O’Connor does develop themes related to philosophies, in particular, postmodernism, existentialism and nihilism. Against such a backdrop, the author unearths the symptoms of her characters suffering from alienation and their ways of overcoming it.

As a result, the paper attempts to reflect the uncertainty and fragmentation of O’Connor’s works, to uncover the textual blind spots which have escaped from the critics’ attention for a long time and throw a new light upon the understanding of her works. In final analysis, what gives Flannery O’Connor’s work a depth not found in many writers who deal with the same sort of material is her view of the modern world from the standpoint of philosophy and theology.

Key Words: Catholicism; good/evil & god/devil; symbolism; image; Christian realism; postmodernism;

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Chapter One Introduction

Flannery O'Connor was an American short story writer, novelist, and essayist. A Roman Catholic from the Bible Belt, she liberally laced her fiction with material from each of these religious backgrounds to create a unique, highly personal vision. Though she died of lupus at the age of 39, O'Connor's books won wide acclaim during her life time. She won a number of honors, including three O. Henry first prizes and the National Book Award for *The Complete Stories*. Her published writings include two novels: *Wise Blood* and *The violent Bear It Away*; short story collections: *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, and *The Complete Stories*; and *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, edited by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, and *The Habit of Being*, edited by Robert Fitzgerald with all her letters preserved.

According to Robert E. Golden, the foremost issue in O'Connor criticism is "the relation between O'Connor's stated religious intent and the realization of that intent within the fiction."¹ There appeared over years various critical groups of O'Connor criticism. Some seem to deny the realization of theological intent. Some consider O'Connor's outlook to be orthodoxly Catholic. Some question whether O'Connor's intent is actually religious; such critics sometimes even assert that O'Connor's artistry is demonic.

In 1962, John Hawkes stated in *Flannery O'Connor's Devil*: if the elements of Flannery O'Connor's fiction could be referred point for point to the established principles of a known orthodoxy, then many of the imaginative beauties and tensions of her fiction would disappear. But this is not the case. The very revivalist or circuit-preacher Protestant world of her fiction, with its improbable combination of religious faith and eccentricity, accounts in large part for the way in which "unknown country" and "actuality" are held balanced in her work.

In 1964, Ted R. Spivey said in *Flannery O'Connor's View of God and Man* that those who see that it is necessary for the modern writer to deal with the decay of our times often do not understand that what gives Flannery O'Connor's work a depth not found in many

¹ Gentry, Marshall, Bruce. *Flannery O'Connor: Religion of the Grotesque*, Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1986, p3

writers who deal with the same sort of material is her view of the modern world from the standpoint of philosophy and theology. Here, the writer pointed out the difference between O'Connor and other writers.

In 1970, Granville Hicks, with Jack Alan Robbins, in their *Literary Horizons: A Quarter Century of American Fiction* narrated that of all the young writers of promise in the postwar period, none seems to him more extraordinary than Flannery O'Connor. Moreover, in looking the reviews over, he notices that at different points he has described Miss O'Connor as compassionate and as lacking in compassion. He believes that compassion was not among Miss O'Connor's many virtues. She was more concerned with understanding the truth about people than in feeling sorry for them.

In 1970, Josephine Hendin in her *The World of Flannery O'Connor* stated that to assume that Miss O'Connor's work is merely a monologue on redemption is to see it only in part, to ignore much of its meanings, and to lose sight of the believer behind the belief. It may have been the only and perhaps unconscious way she could express all the contradictions within her. Furthermore, O'Connor consistently expresses her themes as conflicts or embodies them in images of opposites. All her heroes alternate between the same peculiar, almost contradictory forces: emotional death and violence, confusion and certainty, detachment from human contact and domination by it.

In 1972, Jane Carter Keller said in *The Figures of the Empiricist and the Rationalist in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor*: Flannery O'Connor was a passionate critic of her age. As an orthodox and ardent Romantic Catholic, she viewed the essentially godless condition of modern times as anathema and the secular society as doomed to depravity by its own wrongheaded refusal to recognize the truth of God and to follow God's commandments. She was particularly critical of the secular notion that men can define moral absolutes for themselves. Some of Miss O'Connor's best writing blazes with the force of her desire to make society look at the reality that it tries to ignore and to destroy men's illusions and pretenses about themselves and their times by exposing the naked truth. Such a confrontation with truth is all that can save the world in Flannery O'Connor's view, and to this end she wished to persuade her readers to share her critical attitude.

In 1973, Preston M. Browning, Jr. had his book *Flannery O'Connor and the Demonic*

published. He thought the peculiar insignia of Flannery O'Connor's stories was the shock of evil. By means of the evil an assault is made upon the psyche of the protagonist (and hence upon that of reader), the intent being to tear away the protecting layers of moralism and rationalization, revealing thereby the spiritual malaise and corruption which infests the unconscious.

In 1975, Robert Milder said in *The Protestantism of Flannery O'Connor*: belief, in O'Connor's view, was an instrument for penetrating reality, not for molding it, and the Catholic novel was nothing more or less than one in which the truth as Christians know it has been used as a light to see the world by. In addition, the Catholic writer enjoyed an inestimable advantage over the secular writer, who skeptical of any absolute order, felt called upon to create one in his fiction. Secure in his faith that the universe is meaningful, the Catholic writer was free to observe and reflect his world unburdened by the moral responsibilities of the unbeliever.

In 1976, Patricia D. Maida narrated in *Light and Enlightenment in Flannery O'Connor's fiction* that vision functions as the dynamic principle in Flannery O'Connor's fiction. From her first novel *Wise Blood* through *The Violent Bear It Away*, and in both collections of short stories, O'Connor portrays characters who are morally blind. Her people project their true selves through the physical qualities of their eyes---through color, shape and intensity. And their perception of the world is controlled by their limited powers of sight. The reader enters the world through the eyes of the characters, experiencing an environment fraught with extraordinary signs in the form of natural imagery. Among the recurring images a triad dominates: the treeline, the sun, and the color purple. Essentially, the treeline suggests a delineation between the known and the unknown; the sun reflects light or enlightenment; and the color purple indicates bruising and pain. But on the metaphysical level, this triad represents an existential awareness and a spiritual process.

The year 1980 saw Robert Coles's book *Flannery O'Connor's South* in which he suggested that a quite powerful and distinctive voice is found in O'Connor's works---speaking about man and God, the South and twentieth-century America, our culture and our values, with an intelligence, a shrewdness, a hard skepticism and an unyielding religious faith that are collectively rare indeed among them those days.

Moreover, he indicated that O'Connor was skeptical about the possibilities of human nature, distrustful of any age's or social order's showy self-confidence, and inclined to satirize the present, while doubting the promises of those who look to a new kind of future.

In 2002, Henry T. Edmondson III stated in *Return to Good and Evil: Flannery O'Connor's Response to Nihilism* that O'Connor's interests lie in identifying and refuting the cultural influence of nihilism generally understood and offering a remedy to a world rapidly falling under its spell.

Thus, western critics up to now have consistently addressed to the basic issues in O'Connor's works. Even if they pointed out that the uniqueness of O'Connor's works lies in her view of the modern world from the standpoint of theology and philosophy nihilism, but it is insufficient in interpreting her stories. O'Connor's fiction cannot be explained by her Catholicism alone as well. Rather, her fiction is distinguished for the uncertainty of meaning related to postmodernism.

Postmodernism is used to describe the literary phenomenon that took place in the late 1950s and develops in the 1960s to 80s and beyond. Philosophically, existentialism, which attained its zenith following the disenchantments of WWII, is the main philosophy that exercised a great influence on postmodernist writers. Socially, the late 1950s and 60s was an age of tumult and change. In talking about the causes for the emergence of postmodernism, we cannot overlook the modern linguistic theories, especially, the poststructuralists', which exercise influences on postmodernists.

Centering upon such key terms as postmodernism and fragmentation, the main body of this thesis is divided into 3 parts to discern that her postmodernism propensity is hidden beneath her Catholicism beliefs.

Chapter 2 focuses upon two sets of opposites: good/evil and god/devil. In this part, by discussing the opposites, the author points out that O'Connor appears to undermine the traditional binary oppositions, even turning them upside down. In other words, it's hard to tell good from evil in given circumstances. Meanwhile, Miss O'Connor doesn't believe in God's benevolence. There is no justice in the world. O'Connor's fictions like postmodernism are off-center and confused. The third chapter is to unmask the

self-contradictory writing devices in O'Connor's works. The Deconstructive critic, John Miller, once pointed out the inescapable essence of all texts: "a covert dependence on catachresis, this figurative naming of that which has no name. This dependence subverts reasoned coherence because all figurative devices combine disparate categories and therefore annul both the principle of contradiction and the associated system of binary oppositions that makes rational order possible."² Nevertheless, O'Connor goes a step further than Miller since she even dismantles such term as binary opposition. Therefore, the disparate symbols, image and the game-like grammar of negation are closely scrutinized in this part. Chapter 4 is designed to expound the possible hidden reasons for the massive contradictions. First, the author endeavors to bring the relationship between O'Connor and the Catholic writer into sight. Second, the author attempts to disclose her fictions' relations with World War II, Civil Rights Movement and South within the context. Finally, against the chaotic existence of modern man, the author illuminates O'Connor's involvement with philosophies such as postmodernism, existentialism and nihilism.

² Gang, Zhu, *Twentieth Century Western Theories*, Shanghai Foreign Language Edu. P, 2001, P213

Chapter Two The Postmodernism Dimension of Two Sets of Opposites: Good/Evil and God/Devil

2.1 Lack of Clear Demarcation Line between Good and Evil

The peculiar insignia of Flannery O'Connor's stories is the shock of evil, by means of which an assault is made upon the psyche of the protagonist and hence upon that of reader, the intent being to tear away the protecting layers of moralism and rationalization, revealing thereby the spiritual malaise and corruption which infects the unconscious.... Certain O'Connor stories dramatize the war between the forces of good and evil---depicting ethical dualities that define not only the pain of being divided internally between mind and body, but also painful contradictions in society and the world.

The stories in this group, then, are concerned with mankind's destructive will and limited perceptions regarding physical life. O'Connor's dark view of human will developed from her Catholicism, a dark view intensified by the Calvinism of American romance and Southern Protestantism---all supporting notions that man is innately depraved---incapable of virtuous action in a world that by its very nature promotes evil. When considering O'Connor's "sinners" and those who fail to perceive the divine potential in the physical world, we ought to remember, however, that she defines sin as a "suffering-with". What some readers see as cynical and distorted views of human life, O'Connor sees as honest representations---however exaggerated and symbolic---of human suffering and sin repressed by the community in order to assuage the guilt of individual members.

A Good Man Is Hard to Find precisely presents the worst of O'Connor's tragic events---the extermination of an entire family. The conniving grandmother threatens her family with the news that if they proceed with their plans they will be heading in the path

of an escapee from federal prison, The Misfit. Her obstinacy about going to Tennessee is so great that she convinces herself and the family that the Tennessee plantation she recalls from her girlhood is nearby---when actually the family is driving through the Georgia countryside. She convinces her son, Bailey, to follow her directions by riling up the children over nonexistent secret panels they hope to discover in the old house. Startled by her recollection that the house she seeks is in Tennessee and not Georgia, she tips her basket, holding the cat she has smuggled aboard against her son's wishes. The cat then jumps on the harried father's shoulders and causes an accident, thereby placing the whole family in a vulnerable position when the carload of criminals happens upon the scene of the accident. Without much ado, the three agents of evil proceed to exterminate their victims.

O'Connor presents the reader with a theology lesson: at the beginning of the story the grandmother is totally preoccupied with what she "wants." Other events go on to show us these shallow travelers, people who are the embodiments of the self-interested, materialistic society that arose in the wake of World War. O'Connor seems to be teaching that in the midst of life we are in death. But toward the end of the story, the grandmother's moment of death so clarifies the meaning of life that the grandmother forgets what she "wants" and reaches out to include "The Misfit" as one of her children.

Now, he is defined by his adversarial stance toward the world and its wisdom. Like the child, John Wesley, who is desperate to open the secret panel in the fireplace of the grandmother's mythical white mansion ("not telling the truth but wishing that she were"), The Misfit want to make experience intelligible. He wants to actually see, hear, taste, touch; he needs literal proof of things and ideas.

He has a depth of experience as shown in his listing of occupations--gospel singing, undertaking, plowing "Mother Earth," being in a tornado, seeing a man burnt and a woman flogged--that goes far beyond the banal experience of his victims. Sensitive and psychotic, he has the spiritual insight to recognize that true belief throws "everything off balance"³, just as we, the readers, are thrown off balance by what we see happen. First, we see this family drive out of a settled human environment which brings them face to

³ Flannery O'Connor: *Collected Works: A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, The Library Of America, 1988, p151

face with the beauty and strangeness of God's created world, where the meanest of the trees sparkle. Yet in this Edenic natural environment, a gesture of inclusion registers like the touch of a snake and compels The Misfit to shoot an old woman. O'Connor lets the children reiterate their own delight in having had an ACCIDENT precisely because, one suspects, she would have us understand that there are no accidents in God's plan.

We may wonder is the murder of the grandmother and her family a prelude to The Misfit's eventual salvation, as O'Connor may hint, or is the story a vision of a world without redemptive possibilities? Perhaps O'Connor would agree that the "silver stallion embossed on the front of" the red sweatshirt worn by one of The Misfit's henchmen is a mass-marketed replica of the pale horse on which Death sits in the book of Revelation, the Christian's ultimate source of mystical symbols open to multiple and mutually contradictory interpretations. O'Connor's story, like the Bible itself, like all religious experience, defies pat analysis and for today's readers (consciously post-modern or not) remains open to interpretation. Great art, like the post-modernist's reality, "is not easily organized into coherent systems"⁴. And neither are the "varieties of religious experience" that the philosopher William James described.

The grandmother's development culminates when she feels sympathy for the murderer just before her death. This sympathy is a positive value, even though her gesture of love is brutally rejected when the killer shoots the old woman pointblank. We condemn The Misfit's perverse will, but see his relation to the self-assertive grandmother. The Misfit represents the grandmother's willfulness magnified to the most extreme degree possible. This story is a study of human will and the need to control/overpower others in the physical world.

Our first impressions center on the grandmother's power to manipulate her family and underlying the obvious focus on the old matriarch, there is a subtle focus on the body's physical needs, especially for food.

In other O'Connor's stories, characters suffer hunger, signifying spiritual longing (for example, Parker in *Parker's Back*), but in this story, characters are constantly satisfying their hunger. The mother feeds the baby at the start of the journey. Just past the outskirts of

⁴ Paulson, Morrow, Suzane. *Flannery O'Connor: A Study of The Short Fiction*, North Dakota: Twayne Publishers, 1988, p169

the city, the children eat lunch, and the grandmother eats a peanut-butter sandwich. Then she tells a story about a former beau, Mr. Teagarden (“tea”/ “eat”), who once brought her a watermelon with his initials, E.A.T., carved on it. The melon, she explains, was eaten by a Negro boy when he passed the porch where her suitor had left it and interpreted the initials as license to indulge his appetite. The watermelon of course is associated in slang with pregnancy. Moreover, the eating of this forbidden fruit alludes to Eden. The focus on eating, pregnancy, and the loss of innocence suggests a certain queasiness about the physical world and prepares us for the murders. A failure to develop beyond physical needs and wishes results in human beings “devouring” one another.

Like so many O’Connor mother figures, the grandmother has unthinkingly acquired materialistic values of the American commercialized culture. She is dressed “fit to kill” in a dress trimmed with white lace so that “anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady”.⁵ O’Connor here obviously undercuts the old woman’s materialistic values and concern for physical “appearances.” Immersed in the stream rather than contemplating the end of life, the grandmother judges a “good” man according to superficial first impressions and materialistic values. Her former suitor, Mr. Teagarden, is good because “good-looking” and wealthy from his Coca-Cola stock. She concludes “at once” that Butts is a good man and presumes that dressing up wins not only suitors but also God’s favor.

The manner in which The Misfit coolly “recalls” his past but fails to remember why he was imprisoned reveals that he is unaware of his own aggressive impulses against his father. He represses any sense of guilt resulting from unresolved Oedipal conflicts. The grandmother, then, sees The Misfit as someone “familiar to her as if she had known him all his life”. These aggressive impulses are not “nice,” but the old woman concludes that The Misfit is “a good man” who does not have “common blood” and who comes from “nice people”⁶ ---the third such judgment (Teagarden and Butts were early candidates).

The grandmother’s flattery is ineffective. The criminal explains that he has “seen a man burnt alive” and “a woman flogged”---events probably observed with as disinterested

⁵ *Flannery O’Connor: Collected Works: A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, The Library Of America, 1988, p138

⁶ Eggenschwiler, David, *The Christian Humanism of Flannery O’Connor*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1972, p127

and sadistic a manner as he currently exhibits. He achieves a sense of control over his own aggressive impulses through violence. He equates himself with Christ (It was the same case with Him as with me,"⁷), thus confusing the sufferer who sacrificed himself for the sake of others with the inflictor of suffering on others for the sake of his own pleasure: "No pleasure but meanness," The Misfit says. Although once a gospel singer, this prophet of death now functions as an "undertaker." Unable to believe in Christ's Resurrection because he was not there at the time and cannot intuit beyond the material world, The Misfit examines life but concludes with nihilism. As The Misfit's chat with the grandmother progresses from his personal past to the history of Christianity, the parallelism between a denial of patricidal impulses and a denial of religious truth results in a poignant irony. Indeed, The Misfit finally stands for the entire human race repressing murderous impulses and unable to believe in God.

Finally, The Misfit's concludes that the grandmother "would have been a good woman...if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life". The "good man" of the title reverberates off the "good woman" of the last lines. The grandmother would have been a good woman, if.... During the earlier course of the story, the term "good man" is used quite loosely: the grandmother calls just about anyone she wants to please a "good man." She bemoans, with others, the lack of any real respect or goodness in the present day--people make this complaint all the time. At the same time, she lies, and manipulates, and is generally a pain to everyone--she gets her entire family killed. At the same time, The Misfit does have some points: do punishments fit crimes? What is "good"? And what did Jesus really do, exactly?

The theological discussion at the end of the story, between the grandmother and The Misfit, has gotten a lot of attention from critics. Is she serious about him being her child? Does he really believe in Jesus' miracles, since he believes there is no pleasure in life? Religious beliefs, invoked only at a moment of dire need are nothing like the beliefs that people live by--or are sudden realizations the actual crux of religious belief? There might not be any direct answers to these questions, but there is plenty of room for discussion.

In *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*, we meet Mr. Shiftlet and Mrs. Crater--- again

⁷ Bloom, Harold, ed. *Modern Critical Views: Flannery O'Connor*, New York, New Haven and Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986, p131

an encounter between a diabolical young man and a motherly old woman. "A satanic figure" looms over "the innocents", but unlike *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* the comic impulse lasts from start to end. In this story, O'Connor draws on popular American humor, which celebrates the rascal and commonly presents an interaction between "the con man" and "the gullible victim".⁸ To complicate matters here, "the gullible victim" ineptly aims to con the rascal into marrying her retarded daughter. Although we are told that "she had no teeth", Mrs. Crater belongs to O'Connor's coven of devouring mothers, this time "ravenous for son-in-law". Her nature is phallic, aggressive, wooden, and unfeeling---mechanically comic. Described as being "about the size of a cedar fence post," she wears "a man's gray hat". She lives alone with her handicapped daughter in a desolate spot, but still the mother fearlessly greets the vagabond, Shiftlet---because she "could tell, even at a distance" that he is "no one to be afraid of".⁹

Mr. Shiftlet converses with Mrs. Crater, and he bears "no particular expression on his face." She likewise responds automatically to his philosophical questioning and repeats her favorite phrase, "That's right," so often and in so many different circumstances that O'Connor again intimates a limited human response like other characters who speak in clichés. The singleness of Mrs. Crater's responses and motivations ironically contrasts with the suggestions of duplicity---suggestions reinforced by the fact that the mother and daughter bear the same name (Lucynell Crater), which itself repeats the notion of emptiness (nell, crater). The daughter is a mere a shadow of the mother's will.

Shiftlet appears before Mrs. Crater's porch and stands so that "his figure formed a crooked cross". This handyman then resurrects the old woman's automobile and feels "as if he had just raised the dead". The only life this anti-Christ intends to save, however, will be his own in a materialistic world where innocent young women are sacrificed for possessions---things like automobiles. Shiftlet marries the idiot daughter only because he wants the old woman's car and then promptly deserts her when she falls asleep at the counter of a roadside diner.

Although O'Connor says that "moments [of grace] are prepared for (by me anyway)

⁸ Paulson, Suzanne, Morrow. *Flannery O'Connor: A Study of the Short Fiction*, North Dakota: Twayne Publishers, 1988, p91

⁹ Ellsberg, Robert. *Flannery O'Connor: Spiritual Writings*, Maryknoll & New York: Orbis Books, 2003, p145

by the intensity of the evil circumstances",¹⁰ we sense no grace in this story---unless it be in the satire itself, which attacks the traditional role of Southern woman and the ideal of "simple-mindedness in females." Martha Chew notes that O'Connor toys with the premise of the retarded woman as good wife material. Shiftlet, however, is not in the market for a "good" wife. Like *The Misfit*, Shiftlet progresses from gospel singer to undertaker. Unlike the more aggressive criminal, Shiftlet does not actively destroy his victims. He passively deserts Lucynell, failing to care for her after marrying her to get her mother's car. His passivity reminds us of what we saw in Mrs. McIntyre when she allowed the destruction of Guizac. As O'Connor puts it, Mr. Shiftlet is "of the Devil because nothing in him resists the Devil".¹¹ His passivity and materialism deprive him of spiritual values. To all appearances, Evil wins the day. Or rather: Satan triumphs. For in her world Evil is not just an ethical concept; it is an active force, and it has a name, personal, individual.

The reader of O'Connor's works will find her descriptions of the concept of evil far more conspicuous than her discussions of good. This seems to be the case for at least two reasons. The first reason is that good, portrayed by O'Connor as natural and divine grace intervening in human affairs, occurs where it is most needed---in the midst of evil. The second reason is broader: if modern civilization is to recover a sense of good, it must recover as well an appreciation for evil. Just as one color may not be fully defined except by contrast with its opposite, so neither is good fully comprehended except in contrast to its absence. The novelist Walker Percy goes so far as to suggest that evil must be re-discovered before good is recovered. His character Lancelot remarks, "'Evil' is surely the clue to this age....For everything and everyone's either wonderful or sick and nothing is evil."¹²

2.2 Lack of Clear Demarcation Line between God and Devil

Flannery O'Connor once said that she felt no one should attempt to create a work as

¹⁰ Schaub, Thomas, Hill. *American Fiction in the Cold War*, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991, p151

¹¹ Fitzgerald, Sally & Robert, Fitzgerald eds. *Flannery O'Connor: Mystery and Manners*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1963, p367

¹² Percy, Walker, Lancelot, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977, p138

ambiguous as a novel about a subject which was “not of the gravest concern to you and everybody else and for me this always the conflict between an attraction for the Holy and the disbelief in it that we breathe in with the air of the times.” If it is true that her primary concern as a writer was to make dramatically plausible this conflict, then her preoccupation with evil, with willful perversity, with the physically and spiritually twisted and deformed---in short, with the demonic---is easily understood since she appears to have apprehended a truth almost lost to the modern, secular mind: that the holy and the demonic stand in dialectical relation to one another....

It is accurate to say that no American author since Hawthorne has made such extensive use of the devil; and it is relevant to recall that when Miss O'Connor commented upon the significance of the devil in her understanding of human reality, she stated: “I want to be certain that the devil gets identified as the devil and not taken for this or that psychological tendency.”¹³ She was no less explicit about the role of the devil in her fiction: “I suppose,” she said, “the devil teaches most of the lessons that lead to self-knowledge.” If we further recall that Miss O'Connor referred to those moments when her characters undergo a traumatic collapse of their illusions of righteousness and self-sufficiency as moments of grace, the dialectic and the coincidence of opposites referred to earlier assume new significance. Which is to say that the devil, or the demonic, seems to be not only an indispensable feature of this writer's fictional technique but also an integral element of her theology as well....

God, as Flannery O'Connor sees him in *The Violent Bear It Away*, is not notably endowed with compassion, and this fact may trouble some readers, who feel a certain lack, a certain dryness, a certain harshness. Most often, the devil visits the boy's consciousness as a disembodied voice, whispering, arguing, cajoling to lure him away from his heavenly vision and enlist him in his own demonic legions. The devil's insidious arguments rely on the usual formulas intended to tempt souls away from God: he argues that the notion of resurrection contradicts the facts of chemistry, that the old man was no prophet but a madman who wrote off the rest of the world as “whores and asses” and brought up the boy for the sole purpose of seeing that he himself got a proper burial. He also implants in the

¹³ Preston M. Browning, Jr., *Flannery O'Connor and the Demonic*, Purdue Research Foundation, 1973, p29-41

boy's mind a suspicion of all the old man had taught him: "How do you know if there was an Adam or if Jesus eased your situation any when he redeemed you?"¹⁴

During young Tarwater's stay in town, he has numerous opportunities to baptize Bishop; but the devil always holds him back, urging that he has not yet received a proper sign. Tarwater's growing hunger is, he insists, merely a sensation, not a call from the Lord. During the tense episode in the park, when Tarwater almost realizes his purpose to baptize the child, the stranger (the devil in disguise) is at first silent "as if in the felt presence, he dare not raise his voice." When Tarwater fails of his intention, the voice accuses the boy of confusing a "madness with a mission." He further insists "The Lord is not studying about you, don't know you exist, and wouldn't do a thing about it if He did." Later, when Tarwater hesitates in the boat with Bishop, the voice urges him on, hissing: "It's only one dimwit you have to drown."

The driver who gives Tarwater a ride in his lavender- and cream-colored car is identified as the devil by unmistakable signs. The details of his appearance (the violet eyes and panama hat) match the earlier description of Tarwater's "friend." Tarwater himself detects "something familiar" about the stranger, but he is not sure what it is. His granduncle has specifically warned him to beware the devil's overtures: "You are the kind boy...that 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." In the seduction scene, the devil, dressed in a lavender shirt, proceeds exactly as the old man had warned. The boy, puffing the unfamiliar cigarette and swilling the searing liquor, assumes he is discrediting "all his greatuncle's warnings about poisonous liquor, all his idiot restrictions about riding with strangers."¹⁵

When Tarwater finally makes his way to the charred homestead, the voice of his familiar friend (who has now been restored to invisibility) accompanies him. Looking on the seared landscape, Tarwater recognized it as the sign of the broken covenant. His persistent friend whispers to him to "go down and take it...It's ours. We've won it." At this moment, Tarwater at last resolves the dilemma which has torn his spirit so long. Seizing a pine bough, he sets the forest ablaze until there is "a rising wall of fire between

¹⁴ Walters, Dorothy, *Flannery O'Connor*, Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1973, P100

¹⁵ *Flannery O'Connor: Collected Works*, The Library of America, 1988, P442

him and the grinning presence. He glared through the flame and saw that his adversary would soon be consumed in a roaring blaze.”

At this moment, when Tarwater so violently rejects the devil and his spiritual temptations, he at last receives the sign he has so long awaited. First, he discovers that his granduncle’s corpse has not been consumed by fire, but has been given proper burial by Buford, with a cross at its head. Next, the boy has a great vision of the heavenly throngs feeding on the blessed loaves and fishes, with his granduncle in their midst. Turning to the treeline, Tarwater sees a tree blazing in red gold flame; He knows that “this was the fire that encircled Daniel, that had raised Elijah from the earth, that spoken to Moses and would in the instant speak to him.”¹⁶

The call comes, unmistakable and clear; by midnight, he is on his way to town purged by the holy flames of love. He is now, in a literal sense, the prophet out of the wilderness, as he moves “toward the dark city, where the children of God lay sleeping.” Through violence, Tarwater has been restored to God; through his violent message, he will rouse the sleeping children to remembrance of their forgotten heavenly heritage.

Just as Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood* proclaims that “the only way to truth is through blasphemy,” O’Connor seems to say that the only way to Holy is through the demonic.

¹⁶ Flannery O’Connor: *Collected Works*, The Library of America, 1988, P478

Chapter Three The Self-contradictory Figurative Devices and Writing Techniques of O'Connor's Works from Postmodernism Perspective

3.1 Symbolic Barriers to Salvation

Symbolism might be thought to mark a retreat from the overtly political writings of the 1930s (a retreat into a hermetic, private, aestheticised writing); but for O'Connor the symbolic mode become a pathway towards postmodernism. Undoubtedly O'Connor used symbolism as the core around which she structured her work. Yet O'Connor is insistent on the control an author must have and states this unequivocally when she writes in "The Nature and Aim of Fiction" that

The novelist makes his statement by selection, and if he is any good, he selects every word for a reason, every detail for a reason, every incident for a reason, and arranges them in a certain time-sequence for a reason.¹⁷

Considering this last statement, then, as her sense of a writer's obligation, we can assume that O'Connor's use of two familial symbols, the sun and the hats (especially the black hat) do have an intended meaning.

Mary Parr, in a book review of J. Mitchell Morse discussing the question of James Joyce's Catholicism, makes a statement that bears directly on Flannery O'Connor's use of symbolism. She writes:

St. Thomas is saying the active intellect in man according to Aristotle is like the light received into the air, or, as in Plato, like the sun which furnishes the light. In St. Thomas we go beyond

¹⁷ Fitzgerald, Sally & Robert, Fitzgerald eds. *Flannery O'Connor: Mystery and Manners*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1963, p75

comparison into causality: the active intellect in man is not only like that light and that sun but this intellect in man is caused by God as are the light and the sun. It is not "God Himself"; it is something in man; it is the power of understanding; it is man's divinity. Joyce knew this. His art is an attempt to lift the shadow that man has cast about his own active intellect.¹⁸

O'Connor's art, however, makes little attempt to lift that shadow. In fact, her symbolic treatment seems a strategy intent on subterfuge. Her symbols generate a bewildering religious paradox and undergo constant fluctuations. Her characters, caught in this symbolic upheaval, often become spiritually paralyzed able only to see but not to act. They are rendered not unable or unwilling to participate actively in a quest toward divinity. In fact, O'Connor feels that "Human nature is so faulty that it can resist any amount of grace and most of the time it does." The operative word is "can" here, but O'Connor's characters "cannot." Her characters remain mired, instead, in the sins of their forbearers powerless by her symbols to make a decision between salvation and damnation. O'Connor's symbolic choices extend the inactivity already imposed on them by her grammatical constructions. This enforced symbolic and linguistic impotency visited on the spirituality of her characters establishes little overt Catholicism in the textuality of her stories leaving the reader puzzling over whether her characters can or do achieve salvation. In her stories she equips her fictional personalities with interminable protection by shielding them from God's light by some physical object or impediment. In general, O'Connor uses hats as physical barriers prohibiting the sun, or the God, from touching those who remain unsaved, while their hatless counterparts are allowed to become part of the chosen few. Her characters very often wear hats, many times black hats, and these frequently support wide brims which shade the eyes of her protagonists, symbolically preventing them from receiving grace.

In *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* several characters wear hats or head coverings. The grandmother wears a "navy blue straw sailor hat with a bunch of white violets on

¹⁸ Parr, Mary, *James Joyce and Catholicism*, *A Critical Journal of Letters* 13/2, 1961, p106

the brim". The children's mother has "her head tied around in a green head-kerchief that had two points on the top like the rabbit's ears". The Misfit wears a black hat, and Hiram, one of the killers, wears a gray hat. O'Connor makes enough references to these head coverings for the reader to be fully conscious of their importance as symbol. While a jaunty sailor hat with artificial flowers adorning it or an absurd looking rabbit-eared kerchief make her characters appear ridiculous, O'Connor never trivializes the black or gray hats mentioned without further comment in connection with two of the characters, the Misfit and Hiram, who will later commit murder. The type of hat O'Connor gives a character takes on symbolic meaning.

O'Connor furnishes additional reinforcement of hats as shields from God's light and saving grace by having Hiram, the killer-companion, pull Bailey up to take him to the woods for slaughter, while his partner Bobby Lee (who is never describes as wearing a hat) only follows. It is also Hiram whom the Misfit instructs to take the children's mother into the woods, and while Bobby Lee does pull June Star along with him, O'Connor makes it clear that these two went "into the woods after Hiram and her mother," putting Hiram, the hated criminal in the role of primary killer and hat-shielded sinner. O'Connor's symbols, thus far, seem consistent in this story. However, the hat symbol, which seems to suggest damnation for Hiram, does not effect the same meaning for The Misfit. For despite The Misfit's connection with hats and his disassociation with the sun, O'Connor has often stated that he is potentially capable of attaining salvation. In truth, in her estimation, The Misfit possesses more capacity for grace than the grandmother.

Given O'Connor's comments about the redemptive potential of the two main characters from *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, the reader comparing the grandmother's symbolic treatment and The Misfit's discovers interesting discrepancies. O'Connor frequently indicates the prominence of the sky and the sun in the world of both of these characters. She states again after the grandmother is left alone with her killer that "There was not a cloud in the sky nor any sun. There was

nothing around her but woods".¹⁹ At this point in the story, none of O'Connor's characters has received the saving grace of God, and the sun is absent from their world. However, the grandmother, after she realizes the terrible predicament her family is in, is symbolically able to search for God by becoming virtually hatless because O'Connor pointedly indicates that after the car incident her hat brim "came off in her hand". The grandmother, then, while she does still wear her hat, has no protrusion to hinder her vision. Does this mean she accepts her moment of grace since the sun can now shine into her soul?

The sun and hats consistently appear together as combined symbols in O'Connor's work. O'Connor leaves the grandmother at the instant of her death gazing toward the sun with "her face smiling up at the cloudless sky". No mention is made of the sun, but all obstacles to receiving God's grace have been removed. Her recognition of herself and her own sins in the crazed criminal who kills her does not presuppose that the grandmother has accepted the violent term of grace forced upon her. Readers attempting to rely on O'Connor's symbols for a determination of her salvation can only be uncertain as to O'Connor's symbolic meaning. The hat symbol should indicate the grandmother's ability to become saved, but why is there no mention of the sun in her dying world? She seems only able to share the same cloudless world of *The Misfit* which he possesses when he commits the mortal sin against God's Commandment, "Thou shalt not kill." It would appear that the unreliability of O'Connor's symbols explains, at least in part, the plethora of conflicting critical interpretations of O'Connor's actual fictional intent.

In her two novels, O'Connor also employs hat symbolism which presumably follows the overt pattern of her short stories: characters seem to wear hats while unsaved but become hatless when saved. Throughout *The Violent Bear It Away* Young Tarwater clings to his hat. O'Connor writes: "He followed his uncle's custom of never

¹⁹ Flannery O'Connor: *Collected Works*. The Library of America, 1988, P151

taking off his hat except in bed"²⁰. Tarwater, her reluctant prophet, must find a substitute head covering when his hat falls as he looks out the lawyer's window. Symbolically, his head must be covered before he can venture out of the lawyer's office into the sunlight; he has still not accepted his destiny and, therefore, must cover his head to keep from being accessible to God's grace. So, when he leaves the office O'Connor reports that, "He had an old kerchief tied around his head, knotted at the four corners". Tarwater's head remains covered throughout the novel until he meets his moment of truth when the villainous stranger (also wearing a hat) violates him. O'Connor symbolically reinforces the newly defenseless Tarwater's right to redemption by removing the hat-shield from him when the stranger sneaks away from his sadistic crime "carrying the boy's hat for a souvenir". At this point in the story "When Tarwater woke up, the sun was directly overhead, very small and silver, sifting down light that seemed to spend itself before it reached him". As Tarwater regains his senses "He perceived that his hat was gone". Hatless, he should soon be ready to be infused with grace to make him the prophet his uncle groomed him to be.

O'Connor writes to John Hawkes on 26 December 1959: "It is the violation in the woods that brings home to Tarwater the real nature of his rejection. I couldn't have brought off the final vision without it". If O'Connor considers Young Tarwater a prophet, why does she describe the sun when it first has the opportunity to enter his soul as "small" with "light that seemed to spend itself before it reached him"? If one needs the sun to receive grace (the grandmother died looking for it), and if one must be hatless to be available for grace, why would the sun's saving rays be all but exhausted before they can reach a young hatless Tarwater? What obviously should be O'Connor's signal to her readers that Tarwater's moment of grace is at hand and that finally he is able to receive it (for this the symbolic pattern she elsewhere employs, and this seems her intent as evinced by her comments to Hawkes), instead becomes a confusion of language choices and symbolic inconsistencies.

²⁰ *Flannery O'Connor: Collected Works*. The Library of America, 1988, P337

Neither hat symbols nor the symbolic treatment of the sun in connection with Old Tarwater corresponds with symbolic patterns attached to other characters within the novel nor with previous patterns developed in other short stories. For Young Tarwater, the hat symbolism remains consistent. But this is not the case with Tarwater's great-uncle. Old Tarwater dies inside the house at the breakfast table with his hat on: "a putty-colored hat with the brim turned-up". If Young Tarwater needs to be hatless to experience grace, is Old Tarwater with his head covered, even in death, one of the damned? In an earlier letter to John Hawkes on 13 September 1959, however, O'Connor declares Old Tarwater a prophet. Perhaps, then, having his hat brim turned up puts him in the same category as the grandmother in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*: hated, but because the brim has been removed or diminished, able to receive the saving light of God. It becomes perplexing, nevertheless, that Tarwater, whom we can assume is saved based on O'Connor's comments, dies inside the house in a kitchen "large and dark". The sun's light, which seemed so necessary for the grandmother and which is at least mentioned in connection with Young Tarwater's moment of grace, is apparently not necessary at all for Old Tarwater's salvation. Also troubling in determining O'Connor's symbolic intent is that the symbolic action that precedes the removal of Young Tarwater's hat and opens him to the availability of grace, is a homosexual rape. Readers expecting to see grace realized in New Testament terms by a benevolent God are introduced, instead, to rapes and murders as the conduits connecting redemption to the redeemed.

O'Connor's conception of the state necessary for an individual soul to attain redemption also deviates from common Catholic/Christian beliefs. When Tarwater accepts a ride from the stranger who is "the actualization of Tarwater's friend and mentor, the Devil", he utters four significant statements:

"I drowned a boy."

"I baptized him."

"It was an accident."

"I only meant to drown him,..." (Collected 458)

The incident, in Tarwater's mind, was not the drowning; it was the baptism. In Catholic theology, even the sin of murder can be forgiven. The requirements are: disclosure of the sin either directly to God or to a priest in the confessional with the stipulation that absolution of the sin is contingent on the penitent's true sorrow for the offense against God; a sincere resolve to refrain from repeating the offense; and reparation through some form of penance. Tarwater meets none of these conditions. He "confesses" his sin to the devil, but the confession is nothing more than a retelling of an event; he never repents of his murder of Bishop, and he does no penance to atone for his sinful action. Yet, Tarwater remains blameless of sin in O'Connor's assessment:

That murder is forgotten by God and of no interest to society, and I would proceed quickly to show what the children of God do to him. I am much more interested in the nobility of unnaturalness than in the nobility of naturalness. (Collected 1101)

To thrust grace forcefully upon hapless, helpless creatures like Bishop, by drowning; and on sinful, fanatical, remorseless creatures like Tarwater, by a brutal rape is uncharacteristic of the God O'Connor's Catholic audience would worship.

Colors also seem to carry a symbolic implication for salvation in O'Connor's fictional representations, albeit once again, an unreliable one. Through her insistent allusions to hat and clothing colors, O'Connor prepares the reader for determining their significance as symbols. Inconsistencies in color symbolism, however, parallel O'Connor's inconsistencies with her hat symbols. Black and gray are colors commonly used to express somber or evil happenings, but as dark colors would also possess the property of heat absorption. O'Connor frequently seems to use these two colors as illustrations of corruption and sin, but she does not use this pattern exclusively. Very often black and gray, as colors, act in her fiction as sponge-absorbing pigments soaking up the sun's brilliant rays and as such would capture God's goodness. Which meaning does O'Connor intend for the colors black and gray? Her use of these colors appears to support both interpretations. Dark colors

are sometimes impenetrable shields providing a second defense (the clothing itself being the first) against the infiltration of grace into the souls of the unsaved; in other instances they seem actually to extract the warmth of the sun transmitting it as God's grace into the immortal souls of those in possession of these symbolic colors.

O'Connor also emphasizes her focus on vision in *Mystery and Manners*:

For the writer of fiction, everything has its testing point in the eye, and the eye is an organ that eventually involves the whole personality, and as much of the world as can be got into it. It involves judgment. Judgment is something that begins in the act of vision, and when it does not, nor when it becomes separated from vision, then a confusion exists in the mind which transfers itself to the story. (MM 91)

We glean from O'Connor's portrayal of The Misfit that his lack of visual acuity becomes symbolically more than just his lack of judgment in spiritual and moral matters when we examine the circumstances that surround him with and without his eyeglasses. His glasses act as an obstruction repelling God's light away from his eyes and thus from penetrating his soul. Glasses, generally considered to be devices used to aid poor vision or correct eye problems, take on the opposite meaning for O'Connor who wants us to consider them as physical barriers. She deliberately places them on the eyes of The Misfit when he kills the grandmother, but she indicates that he "put his gun down on the ground and took off his glasses and began to clean them" after the murder. O'Connor seems, in this story, to have chosen this unusual symbolic barrier to deflect the sunshine of God's grace causing The Misfit to be unable or unwilling to arrive at proper spiritual decisions while wearing them.

When The Misfit's eyes are viewed without his glasses they seem to reflect his potentiality for grace upon which O'Connor is insistent. She describes him thus: "Without his glasses, The Misfit's eyes were red-rimmed and pale and defenseless-looking". This defenselessness is only apparent when his glasses are removed but seems to be the core around which O'Connor structures her rationalizations about the state of his eternal soul:

I don't want to equate the Misfit with the devil. I prefer to think that, however unlikely this may seem, the old lady's gesture, like the mustard-seed, will grow to be a great crow-filled tree in the Misfit's heart, and will be enough of a pain to him there to turn him into the prophet he was meant to become. But that's another story. (MM112-13)

After *The Misfit* shoots the grandmother, O'Connor makes him aware on some level that he has denied God, and she alerts her readers to this fact by momentarily allowing him to remove and attempt to cleanse this barrier. The act of removing this physical barrier and O'Connor's use of the verbal construction "began to clean" reinforce the idea that she intended his eyeglasses as symbolic impediments and they are, perhaps, the vehicle through which O'Connor's attempts to portray the state of *The Misfit's* moment grace in a 14 April 1960 letter to John Hawkes that bears mention:

His shooting [of the grandmother] is a recoil, a horror at her humanness, but after he has done it and cleaned his glasses, the Grace has worked in him and he pronounces his judgment: she would have been a good woman if he had been there every moment of her life. (Collected 1125)

The Misfit's grace seems only available "after" he was able to remove and clean the symbolic eyeglass barrier. The story ends with no further mention of *The Misfit's* glasses, though the reader would expect that they are still in his possession. We might assume from this story that it is the wearing of glasses (not their possession) that prohibits the intake of grace.

But what might the reader conclude about the symbolic intent of wearing, not wearing, possessing, or not possessing glasses after reading *Good Country People*?

In *Good Country People*, Joy-Hulga wears glasses until the Bible salesman takes them off. If we can trust O'Connor's visual symbolism, Hulga's moment of grace comes at the end of the story for at that point her sight becomes unfettered and presumably she will be able to accept salvation. O'Connor believed the theft of Hulga's wooden leg would alert readers to the fact that the Bible salesman "has taken away part of the girl's personality and has revealed her deeper affliction to her for

the first time”²¹. In terms of O'Connor's eyeglass symbolism, Hulga's revelation only comes after the Bible salesman seizes her glasses, just as The Misfit's eyes only become red-rimmed after he removes his glasses. Therefore, if the symbol of glasses is to remain constant, the Bible salesman, whose corruption endures, should be visually impaired as he violates Hulga. The Bible salesman, however, never wears eyeglasses. Instead, O'Connor pointedly puts him in possession of Hulga's glasses and “a woman's glass eye”. Presumably Hulga's glasses could be perceived as clouding the Bible salesman's vision if he wore them, but they remain in his pocket. And a prosthesis not his own, the woman's glass eye, could hardly be viewed as interfering with his sight as it would be physically impossible for him to insert it, thus making it worthless to him as an optical impediment. These items remain useless to him as shields while he acts the devil, but both are items that he willfully seeks to possess.

The Bible salesman is never described as wearing glasses when he commits his sins and thus seems unlike The Misfit. Yet at the end of this story he, like The Misfit, is in possession of optical devices. If we know that O'Connor intended the Bible salesman as damned, we can accept the unshielded posture that would make his eyes ready for a beatific vision. The quandary facing the reader becomes one of resolving the vacillating symbolic connotation of glasses as possible barriers to grace with O'Connor's own explanations of the redemptive potential for The Misfit and the Bible salesman. When confronted with the abundant inconsistencies present in these stories, readers fall back on O'Connor's own explications if they are aware of them, or create their own varying interpretations if they are not. O'Connor's symbolic oscillations in this story heavily constrain a consistent, reliable interpretation of her use of eyeglasses.

In O'Connor's second novel, *Tarwater*, after he has drowned Bishop but before he is raped, wishes that the sun would “get out of the sky altogether or be veiled in a

²¹ Fitzgerald, Sally & Robert, Fitzgerald eds. *Flannery O'Connor: Mystery and Manners*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1963, P99

cloud. He turned his face enough to rid his vision of it". After his violation has occurred O'Connor writes that "His eyes looked small and seedlike as if while he was asleep, they had been lifted out, scorched, and dropped back into his head". His eyes have received the seeds of grace. O'Connor ends this novel with the following paragraph:

He stood clenching the blackened burnt-out pine bough. Then after a moment he began to move forward again slowly. He knew that he could not turn back now. He knew that his destiny forced him on to a final revelation. His scorched eyes no longer looked hollow or as if they were meant only to guide him forward. They looked as if, touched with a coal like the lips of the prophet, they would never be used for ordinary sights again. (Collected 473)

The action of God through the fire-scorching of Tarwater's eyes earns him his redemptive standing in O'Connor's fiction; his vision now can become Vision. Until Tarwater accepted this grace of God forced upon him, his eyes did not see. Tarwater comes through violence to realize his mission as prophet. But unlike Haze, he need not be blind to receive his inner sight. O'Connor's treatment of the sun, eyes, and vision remains inconsistent throughout her fictional works.

3.2 Images versus Religious Intent in O'Connor's Fiction

Her images, which remain foreign to the cultural values of the shared Catholic imagination, like her symbols and style, become instead antithetical in meaning for the majority of the Catholic and Christian cultural community. Her treatment of the unusual not only reveals the "distortion that destroys" but seems, moreover, to focus insistently on those destructive forces for an audience perhaps more traditionally Christian in its imagination than she assumed.

In developing her fictional imagery O'Connor often surpasses the "limited patience" of a reading public guided to conclusions she most probably did not intend. Hawkes's view supports this assumption:

My own feeling is that just as the creative process threatens the Holy throughout Flannery O'Connor's fiction by generating a paradoxical fusion of improbability and passion out of the Protestant "do-it-yourself" evangelism of the south, and thereby raises the pitch of apocalyptic experience when it finally appears; so too, throughout this fiction, the creative process transforms the writer's objective Catholic knowledge of the devil into an authorial attitude in itself in some measure diabolical.²²

O'Connor's world is peopled with her autocratic images of disharmony in family relationships, animalistic portraits of humanity, blasphemous and sacrilegious portrayals, and inanimate images that deny spirituality to God's chosen. Her grim vision of both God and his chosen deny the good news in the gospel. The peculiar imagery she so generously intersperses throughout her fiction complements her linguistic and symbolic choices which diverge from her expressed orthodox Catholic beliefs and depart radically from the beliefs of her audience.

The landscape images O'Connor uses in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* make use of constant impressions that reinforce the living presence of God the Redeemer as an omnipresent being in a disbelieving world. As the grandmother's family begins their fateful trip, O'Connor makes reference to "Stone Mountain" and the "blue granite" along the highway, references that serves as images associated with the rock rolled in front of Christ's tomb, as well as being referential images suggesting Peter, the rock upon whom the Catholic Church was built. God is available in this world to those who can see. Trees and wood, their by-product, are omnipresent in the grandmother's world as a reminder of the reality of the wooden cross of Christ's suffering and his redemption for all his earthly creatures. The light becomes sun, or Son, and the colors red, purple, and blue, replete in O'Connor's natural surroundings, emerge in her fictional environments to serve presumably as an indication of the Georgia landscape as well as an indication of God's majestic presence in the land of the lost. These images, which are as real in O'Connor's world as she feels they should become in the

²² Hawkes, John. *Flannery O'Connor's Devil*, *Sewanee Review*, 1962, p13

lives of her readers, layer upon nature's earthly occurrences the spiritual propinquity of Christ the King to his earth-bound creations. However, O'Connor's linguistic choices determined by her preference for a nominal style often obscure the divinity she means to suggest with these references. By burying Christ-suggesting images in subordinate positions in the sentence as either objects of a prepositional phrase or as adjectival modifiers, two characteristics that may often accompany a nominal style, O'Connor interferes with the accessibility of these images as religious signals for her reading public.

In *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* O'Connor details the start of the family's journey. She writes that the grandmother

Pointed out interesting details of the scenery: Stone Mountain; the blue granite that in some places came up to both sides of the highway; the brilliant red clay banks slightly streaked with purple; and the various crops that made rows of green lace-work on the ground. The trees were full of silver-white sunlight and the meanest of them sparkled.²³

O'Connor's attempt to connect the natural with the supernatural is minimized by her use of images that receive little impact structurally. The critical reader will observe that although O'Connor may expect that the images in this text will evoke associations with God and religion, the intended force is mitigated due to her choice of punctuation. The images that have religious implications---"Stone Mountain", "blue granite", "brilliant red clay banks", "purple", "crops", "green", "ground"---become subordinated after the colon, reducing them to mere listings as items of interest. Moreover, the deep structure of the second sentence of this passage becomes significant.

O'Connor's sentence---"The trees were full of silver-white sunlight and the meanest of them sparkled"---becomes in its deep structure: "[The] trees were full; [the] meanest sparkled." The "silver-white sunlight," the potential indicator of God's grace, is lessened by its syntactic application as the object of the preposition "of". The

²³ Orvell, Miles. *Flannery O'Connor: An Introduction*, Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1991, p119

adjective, "silver-white", serves only as a cursory descriptor of the all important noun "sunlight", dramatically lessening its dynamic. Given her religious proclivity, O'Connor was perhaps striving to alert the reader to the religious significance of the trees from which Christ's cross was made by associating it with God's brilliant light. But by burying the celestial connection as an objective within the prepositional phrase that impacts upon the adjective "full", O'Connor deflects the focus away from the distinctive Christ image, hiding it in nonemphasis. The reader must remain especially attentive to merge O'Connor's images with her oft reaffirmed spiritual message; otherwise stylistically these images vanish silently into the text.

To explore this concept of concealed religious images further we can extract the words that function as nouns/pronouns in O'Connor's description of the scenery in this same excerpt. They are:

Mountain, granite, that [relative pronoun], places, sides, highway, banks, purple, crops, that [relative pronoun], rows, lace-work, ground, trees, sunlight, meanest, them.

Of these seventeen nouns/pronouns, eight of them function as the objects of a preposition:

places, sides, highway, purple, lace-work, ground, sunlight, them.

Selecting the remaining nouns/pronouns left to carry the force of O'Connor's message yields the following list:

Mountain, granite, that [relative pronoun], banks, crops, that [relative pronoun], rows, trees, meanest.

Through syntactic diminishment the force of the image becomes absorbed into the prepositional phrases and adjectival modifiers. The intensity of these images, which might lead O'Connor's readers to perceive Christ as ever present in their world, thus significantly declines in vitality.

Similar images of a traditionally blasphemous nature exist in O'Connor's second novel. In *The Violent Bear It Away* when Tarwater realizes his vocation is to baptize Bishop he knows that

He was called to be a prophet and that the ways of his prophecy would not be remarkable. His black pupils, glassy and still, reflected depth on depth his own stricken image of himself, trudging into the distance in the bleeding stinking mad shadow of Jesus, until at last he received his reward, a broken fish, a multiplied loaf. (Collected 389)

Tarwater envisions Jesus as a bleeding, stinking madman who rewards his followers with one broken fish, one multiplied loaf. Here the imagery appropriates traditional Christian imagery of a bleeding Christ who fed the multitudes with a few fish and loaves of bread. Yet O'Connor turns this image into a repulsive physical presence that mocks the reader with a reward that linguistically cannot satisfy---"a broken fish, a multiplied loaf," an image that becomes stripped of its miraculous nature to feed the body and heal the spirit.

The reader, faced with O'Connor's profane imagination of a Christian (The Misfit, the Tarwaters) and her shocking parody of subversion embodied in her image of Christ himself, may "rewrite" O'Connor's story as a satire on religion and an irreverent mockery of those fundamentalist imaginations of God.

O'Connor's story of the grandmother and *The Misfit* introduces images that connect characters with lifeless materials and objects and often deny them their spirituality. In *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* the grandmother's face is described as leathery, and the family passes by a graveyard with "five or six grave fenced in the middle of it". Perhaps O'Connor means to indicate the spiritual condition of her characters. The grandmother is spiritually like a dead animal, only realized religiously, at this point on her existence, as an empty outer covering. This inanimate imagery appears to reinforce O'Connor's view that these characters have not yet received their moments of grace. Here the grandmother is not in possession of the necessary grace to attain salvation. But O'Connor's obvious foreshadowing of the graves that will soon be needed for the grandmother's family sets up ambiguity as to the grandmother's redemptive fate. The graveyard the family passes had "five or six graves" in it. Will the sixth grave be needed for the grandmother, the sixth member of the family, or will she be resurrected from her life of pious indifference to the true

meaning of Christianity and, therefore, need no earthly grave? To the reader O'Connor's images often appear to be at cross purposes.

While en route to their portentous destiny, the grandmother's family stops at "a part stucco and part wood filling station" for sandwiches and the family sit down at a "broad table". As they drive off to continue their trip, the grandmother tells of a house she wants them to visit, describing it as having "six white columns...and two little wooden trellis arbors on either side in front". She tells about the family silver hidden in the house which excites John Wesley who wants to "poke all the woodwork and find it!" Bailey, to stop his children's bickering, turns "onto the dirt road and the car raced roughly along in a swirl of pink dust" to where their accident occurs, and where the family will collide with The Misfit and his murderous cohorts. The grandmother's vision of the house she yearns to visit can be viewed as her unconscious desire to realize entrance into God's mansion in the sky for herself and her family. O'Connor once again punctuates her descriptions with landscape images omnipresent in her Georgia surroundings. But in religious terms, she may have intended for the many images of wood and dirt and pink dust to take on additional meanings as indications of God's awareness of the frailty of his creatures and of his Son's mission to suffer and die for all humankind. In this story, once again O'Connor reduces the intensity of her images by burying them in prepositional phrases or hiding them as descriptive adjectives.

John Hawkes writes that O'Connor's "extreme absurdity of juxtaposing the human and the inanimate" leads to "the creation of flat personality."²⁴ Images of metals, wood, and paper products, concrete, stucco, clay, dirt, stone and granite, which are so prevalent throughout O'Connor's fiction, create conditions that intrinsically connect lifeless substances with creatures usually presumed to have the potential for spiritual life. While it is unlikely O'Connor intended this imagery to detract from her message, damnation and inanimate imagery ostensibly meld in *A*

²⁴ Hawkes, John. *Flannery O'Connor's Devil*, Sewanee Review, 1962, p15

Good Man Is Hard to Find and in most of her fiction. O'Connor's infusion into her text of descriptive images with inanimate references undermines any sentiments of expected Christian humanism. O'Connor's fictional images, therefore, more readily convey an attitude toward salvation that can be interpreted as nullifying redemptive opportunities.

The difficulty of understanding O'Connor's images becomes most problematical in her imagery of death and destruction since the question of what is being destroyed or born in its place is so thematically important. The imagery surrounding *The Misfit* and his companions illustrates the confusion. In *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* when the three killers approach the family in "a big black battered hearse-like automobile", O'Connor describes Bobby Lee, one of the escaped convicts, as wearing "a red sweat shirt with a silver stallion embossed on the front of it", and he describes *The Misfit* as "holding a black hat and a gun". These images apparently derive from the Apocalypse (silver, death, horses, black) but does O'Connor mean them to announce the triumph of evil as in the Four Horseman of the Apocalypse, or the revelation of Christ's grace at the moment of judgment?

How to read *The Misfit's* connection with images of earth and death remains enigmatic. For the seven remaining pages of the story O'Connor emphasizes *The Misfit's* connections to earth with imagery that aligns him intimately with burials and death both physically and spiritually. As an escaped convict, he buried his clothes; as an undertaker, he buried people; and as a prisoner in the penitentiary, he was buried alive. Do these images make him an embodiment of death, or one resurrected from it? In the first two burial images, *The Misfit* participated in the performance of the burial act. In the penitentiary image, however, the passive construction indicates that *The Misfit* did not perform the action (was not penitential), but was, in fact, buried by someone or something. *The Misfit* seems not in control of his destiny; on the other hand, he is the active killer of the victimized family. Unless the reader is aware that O'Connor intends *The Misfit* ultimately to join the Resurrection, the emphasis on death and burial images creates a linguistic diversion masking the conception of a

resurrection that belongs to those "born again" in the spirit of Christ.

O'Connor believed that violence, though sometimes distasteful, was an instrument aiding salvation. She wrote in *Mystery and Manners*: "in my own stories I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace". Feeley cites this very quotation in her support of O'Connor's explanation: "The story leaves open the possibility that the grandmother's mysterious action of love will open The Misfit's mind to the reality of mystery". Feeley continues to use O'Connor's explanations as her touchstone. She writes that

The Misfit is a "good man" in many respects. The author draws him with compassion and puts him far ahead of Bailey and Red Sammy in gentleness and politeness.²⁵

The reader can only wonder if the grandmother and her family would agree with this assessment.

Feeley's reading is typical of that from accept O'Connor's explanations as to what her stories mean. However, a reader not privy to such justification may find few reasons to vindicate The Misfit for the grandmother's murder. To most readers the superficial context surrounding the words "politeness" and "gentleness" do not equate to the virtue of "goodness" which, in *The Misfit*, has become unrecognizable. Only after the grandmother's touch and her subsequent murder does O'Connor ascribe to this killer what may be reported minimally as regret. Feeley, however, sees The Misfit's role in O'Connor's terms. She writes that

The Misfit's comment, "She would have been a good woman... if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life," indicates that he understands the impact of violence which has ended her alienation by returning her to reality and transformed her from a "lady" to a "good woman."

While O'Connor does, in fact, consider The Misfit a modern-day Lazarus who

²⁵ McMullen, Joanne, Halleran. *Writing against God: Language as Message in the Literature of Flannery O'Connor*, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1996, p75

will be resurrected through the grandmother's touch, the reader is constantly confronted with images that confound this reading. The Misfit does tell the grandmother that "Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead," which obviously indicates his awareness that only Jesus can offer salvation to creatures. However, The Misfit's statement is followed by several conditional situations. The Misfit says:

If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn't then it's nothing for you to do but enjoys the few minutes you got left the best what you can---by killing somebody or burning down his houses or doing some other meanness to him. (Collected132)

The story ends with three more sentences spoken by The Misfit:

"She would of been a good woman," The Misfit said, "if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life."

"Some fun!" Bobby Lee said.

"Shut up, Bobby Lee," The Misfit said. "It's no real pleasure in life." (Collected 133)

From the first "if" statement on page 132 until the end of the story, The Misfit voices his thoughts in eight sentences. Within these sentences he uses the word "if" five times. Additionally, the grandmother responds to these conditionals with the statement that "Maybe He didn't raise the dead," another provisional proposition. Even the surrounding narrative emphasizes the tentativeness of this world, for O'Connor writes that The Misfit's face was "twisted...as if he were going to cry". But was he? In these statements O'Connor leaves a syntactical uncertainty about the spiritual disposition of characters who despite their questioning of an unjust world must commit injustices such as murder to reveal a God of Love.

Feeley insists O'Connor's fictional explanations assure that The Misfit, given the proper conditions, will throw down everything and follow Him. However, once again the language and imagery slip away from O'Connor's conscious constraints. The transformation the reader is asked to consider as a definition of "a good man" is not that the grandmother has been changed from a shallow self-centered "lady" to a caring spiritual being, but rather that The Misfit has been transformed from a

heartless killer to a member of the Resurrection. Within O'Connor's framework, and in her assessment, The Misfit is to come from the dead as one of those resurrected through Christ; he will follow Him. One wonders, however, if Lazarus had been a sociopath or a perverted child killer, would the biblical story have worked as a parable? Readers must question the kind of deity who manifests his grace through depraved crimes and sees the "good man" in a killer of children. While O'Connor believed that experiencing grace and salvation through violent means was a way to rescue irreligious beings antagonistic towards salvation from certain damnation, her images fail to provide insights that can transform violent behavior into conduct overtly recognized as divine. Thus O'Connor's fictional reality, wherein the perpetrators of violence are afforded the same salvific consideration afforded the victims, becomes troublesome. O'Connor's images do more to displace the power embodied literally and figuratively in Christ's resurrection than to embrace it.

3.3 The Grammar of Negation

Through grammatical structures and word play O'Connor encases her characters in a language that denies them the possibilities of attaining the salvation toward which they struggle. Further, this negativism does not cease once the moment of grace is offered. O'Connor's skill at veiling of her grammatical structures raises questions as to the ultimate destiny her characters achieve. An underlying negativism emphasizes the warning intended for her reading public, but the fact that negatives continue to plague her characters after they receive a glimpse of salvation blurs the essence of her message, and perhaps even denies her characters the fate she would choose for them.

Negative structures are undeniably observable in *Good Country People*. From the moment Hulga sets out to meet the Bible Salesman until the end of the story, fifty-six paragraphs with a total of 204 sentences occur. Negative words or negative verbs

appear in forty-four of these paragraphs; only twelve paragraphs have a positive cast, a condition that gives this passage an overwhelmingly negative complexion.

The predominance of the negative coordinate conjunction "but" in this story subtly implies an environment where exceptions or contradictions flourish. The plethora of words that obliterate existence or disguise its reality gives evidence of a world where despair seems almost tangible. Additional words in this section with negative connotations or with implications of concealment that work to negate expectations are:

Illusions, nowhere, empty, blindfolds, losing, escaping, detached, distance, destroy, surrendering.

The tensions created in O'Connor's language by this negative overtone tempers any glimmer of hope that might exist for the spiritual future of her characters by offering disputable and confounding testimony as surrounding accompaniments when this characters are offered views of their fatal visions.

While it is possible to assume that O'Connor meant to indicate negativity about the world in which her godless characters live, and especially about the world surrounding Hulga, the epitome of nihilism, she provides no relief for Hulga once she has been exposed to God's grace. Though Hulga is shattered by her experiences, O'Connor offers her no release from negation. As the story ends, Hulga "was left" with a "churning face". The verb "was left" indicates that Hulga was not able to go anywhere as she contemplates the reality that now surrounds her.

In contrast, Hulga sees the Bible Salesman "struggling successfully over the green speckled lake". One might expect that he would "struggle", for the Bible Salesman is the obvious villain and a connection with negatives would be appropriate. Yet, the Bible Salesman, by an alliance with the adverb "successfully", can somehow escape negativity. The ironic image O'Connor leaves with her readers is that the Bible Salesman, as evil manifest, walks the green earth in a metaphor reminiscent of Jesus, God Incarnate, walking on the waters. Like Jesus, the Bible Salesman accomplishes this action-in triumph. Hulga, whom the reader might expect to be redeemed after her

sudden realization, is left prostrate, overcome not only by her nihilism but even more importantly thoroughly incapacitated by the language of negativity that obfuscates her chances for redemption.

A Temple of the Holy Ghost has been described as “one of O'Connor's most positive and reassuring pictures of human potentiality” and initially appears unlike the despairing portrait of humanity sketched in *Good Country People*. The unnamed child in the story does seem to achieve a sort of humility when she considers, in one of her many reveries, that of her numerous faults she “was eaten up...with the sin of Pride, the worst one”. However, once the child begins to acknowledge her part in God's scheme, her language is burdened with negatives. O'Connor expresses her prayer in the following passage:

Hep me not to be so mean, she began mechanically. Hep me not to give her so much sass. Hep me not to talk like I do. Her mind began to get quiet and then empty but when the priest raised the monstrance with the Host shining ivory-colored in the center of it, she was thinking of the tent at the fair that the freak in it. (Collected 247-48)

Every one of these sentences expresses a negative intent. Perhaps O'Connor means to suggest the child's preparation for God's revelation through her entrance into the traditional Christian *Via Negativa*.

O'Connor explicitly indicates in several instances that the child “didn't have anything she could think of,” that she was “empty-minded” (Collected 244). Her final prayer even emphasizes that “Her mind began to get quiet and then empty” (Collected 248). This emptying seems to allow for her eventual salvation through her spiritual entrance into mysticism. As Alain Cugno explains,

Mysticism is negative, because it contrasts believing (which derives from faith) with seeing. For mysticism, what shall ultimately be seen is the same as what is now believed. But in relation to seeing, believing is negative. We do not see what we believe.²⁶

Eugene A. Maio, discusses the view the mystic must attain to reach God:

²⁶ Cugno, Alain.. *Saint John of The Cross: The Life and Thought of Christian Mystic*, London: Burns & Oates, 1979, p16

God, one and simple, is beyond the visible universe. If God cannot be experienced within the human, finite condition, to voluntarily undertake a journey through a night in which all that is not God is abandoned.²⁷

As Maio reveals, the philosophy of St. John of the Cross embodies the belief that "The journey to God must therefore be a negative way: a denial, a disengagement, an annihilation of everything that is not God." Yet confusion surrounds the child's spiritual condition. The problem of interpreting the child's thought as approaching the philosophy of mystics such as St. John of the Cross is exemplified in the language that O'Connor chooses for the child. In her prayer, the child does seem to be using negatives to effect a positive change and might even be considered as contemplating negation to achieve satisfaction. In the first three sentences of her prayer, the negativism is overtly expressed in the negative "not". However, the curious aspect of this "prayer" the child offers to God if she could "not...be so mean," "not...give...so much sass," "not...talk like I do." Although the negatives in the passage can be considered as evidence of the child's humility and her submissiveness in the face of God, her use of the intensifiers quantifies the degree to which she will accept change. Her request of God reinforces her clinging adherence to her previously detailed mean-spirited disposition. She will continue her misbehavior; only the degree of her misconduct will be mitigated.

The use of the words "so" and "so much" indicates that the child is unwilling to pray for a complete conduct change. She is unwilling to reach the totality of negation in which "all that is not God is abandoned." When she asks if she might not talk "like I do" the implication is that the ill manner in which she talks is an intricate and inextricable part of her personality and is something she is reluctant to eliminate completely. O'Connor's use of these intensifiers only allows for a degree of change, not the "total and uncompromising" posture that St. John of the Cross in *Ascent of Mount Carmel* felt necessary to ensure that one's "soul may receive the likeness of God."

²⁷ Eugene A. Maio. *St. John of The Cross: The Imagery of Eros*, Madrid: Playor, S.A., 1973, P163

As the child contemplates her future she feels that

She would have to be a saint because that was the occupation that included everything you could know; and yet she knew she would never be a saint. She did not steal nor murder but she was a born liar and slothful and she sassed her mother and was deliberately ugly to almost everybody. (Collected 243)

O'Connor's language in this passage emphasizes the inherency of the child's meanness when she calls her "a born liar" whose ugliness is "deliberate." The positive note in this story becomes entangled and overtaken by the language of negativity. The child, through her prayer, concedes her imperfections but consents only to remain in a modifying position. Her mechanical prayer, clouded by thoughts of the freak at the fair, unites her with the freak's acceptance of his condition. She, like the freak, does not "dispute hit. This is the way He wanted me to" (Collected 248). She approaches the negative way to salvation, but deliberately, through linguistic choices, stops short of the total negativity needed to empty her soul of "everything that is not God."

The last image the reader has of the child as she leaves the religious setting of the convent is of

The big nun [who] swooped down on her mischievously and nearly smothered her in the black habit, mashing the side of her face into the crucifix hitched onto her belt and then holding her off and looking at her little periwinkle eyes. (Collected 248)

The child herself is "nearly smothered" into the blackness of the nun's clothing, her face "mashing" the crucifix, yet she is deprived of a complete religious union. The child, through her non-prayer, has spiritually negated a change in deportment. O'Connor's language, which intimately but negatively associates the child with the personages or articles of religion, combines with the child's deliberate behavior to suggest her non-redemption. Therefore, while May writes that "the child comes---as each of us must---to realize what her limitations are but more importantly, what she can accomplish despite them," the negative language of the child and the smothering,

hurtful images that intimately connect her to the people and objects important to her religion, and by implication her salvation, "dispute hit." O'Connor's language of negation leaves the child unable to articulate "what she can accomplish despite" her limitations. She is obsessed, instead, with her frailties and unconscious of her possibilities. Her mind never becomes "empty" enough to receive God's grace. The underlying restrictions placed on her through her grammatical choices, as well as the injurious union with the nun and crucifix, obscure the possibility of an optimistic spiritual outcome for the child, shutting her out of any religious fulfillment.

O'Connor's grammar of negation also encompasses language choices that point toward an underlying directional bias for movement "down" as opposed to "up", an implied metaphorical structure pervasive in Western culture that builds on the idea that God/paradise is up and Satan/hell is down.

In *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, the ending of the story alludes to a variety of "up" and "down" references, but the predominance of "down" is significant:

1. the grandmother raised her head...
2. "Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead."
3. "enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can---by killing somebody or burning down his house..."
4. "Maybe He didn't raise the dead," the old lady mumbled...feeling so dizzy that she sank down in the ditch with her legs twisted under her.
5. Hitting the ground with his fist.
6. "Listen lady," he said in a high voice....
7. Then he put his gun down on the ground....
8. Hiram and Bobby Lee returned from the woods and stood over the ditch, looking down at the grandmother who half sat and half lay in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a child's and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky.
9. "She was a talker, wasn't she?" Bobby Lee said, sliding down the ditch...(Collected 132)

The sense of "downness" predominates in this concluding section of the story. Only four directional references indicate an "up" orientation.

O'Connor's directional words point us "downward". Even those sentences that express a connection with "up" are tentative about the legitimacy of this motion. Sentence 2, spoken by The Misfit, and containing the directional concept of "up", seems to negate its "upness" because it is followed by the negative sentence "and He shouldn't have done it," along with a succeeding series of "ifs" that indicate his skepticism.

For O'Connor's characters the concept of "down" infuses their world with a desperate and depressing ambience that suggests that the future is not better. In fact for them, there is often no future, only a dreary, miserable present. O'Connor's negative outlook pervades her linguistic structures and departs from the traditional Catholic view of future everlasting spiritual life. In most of her fiction, her characters lead lives without promise, and any hope for salvation is tangled in a grammar of negation that cloaks their fate in mystery and mires them in hopelessness.

Chapter Four Possible Hidden Reasons for the Massive Contradictions

4.1 Flannery O'Connor and the Catholic Writer

She proposes that the Catholic writer is one who is humble before reality, never manipulating it and never turning his eyes away from its ugly or unpleasant phases. True humility is based upon the recognition that God has given man whatever portion of the “good” he possesses; in the case of the writer it is his talent...with all its limitations as well as its powers. Before scenes that one writer can recreate in words another is helplessly inarticulate, since within the large vocation of writer there are more specialized vocations; indeed, as Miss O'Connor says in *The Fiction Writer and His Country*, “a vocation is a limiting factor which extends even to the kind of material that the writer is able to apprehend imaginatively....The Christian writer particularly will feel that whatever his initial gift is, it comes from God; and no matter how minor a gift it is, he will not be willing to destroy it by trying to use it outside its proper limits.”²⁸ Thus, though she hates the phrase *regional writer*, her settings are southern, and though she does not disbelieve in joy, her characters are drawn from those who have crippled it within them.

The Catholic writer reveals reality....It is not the artist's job to assure modern America that because she is the greatest nation on the face of the globe, all shall be well....If the grotesque is an important part of reality today, the Catholic writer must not only portray grotesquerie but make sure that readers are shocked into realizing it as such, in an age when the perverse is accepted as normal. Actually, “a purely affirmative vision cannot be demanded of him [the Catholic writer] without limiting

²⁸ Paulson, Suzanne, Morrow. *Flannery O'Connor: A Study of the Short Fiction*, Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1988, p154

his freedom to observe what man has done with the things of God”.²⁹

Undoubtedly Flannery O’Connor...has often met this query: “But doesn’t your religion inhibit you? Doesn’t it restrict the freedom of your art?” Her reply is a straightforward, “Not at all; in fact, quite the contrary.” Her reasons for making this denial show that she has penetrated the sense of the Biblical line, “Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.” In the essay quoted above, she explains her position:

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

In other words, it gives him a vantage point in the universe, a “view from a rock,” where, knowing exactly where he is, he can accept the materials brought him by his servant the eye and, transfiguring them in the light of his mind, fashion microcosm after microcosm as he pursues his craft. Moreover, it prevents his mistaking statistics for reality by insisting that he use the absolute and not the relative as criterion....

Flannery O’Connor pities the poor and afflicted denizens of the rural South who people her [fiction]. They are largely warped in spirit, a warping which becomes increasingly evident as their tales unfold; but somehow the shriveling of their souls has taken them by surprise and one cannot help feeling sympathy for their abortive efforts to break through the cocoon of ice the surrounds them---despite all barriers, to reach some sort of fulfillment. The evangelical religion of her area holds out to them little promise for communion either with Deity or with each other.

Every short story or practically every one (except for a few near parodies that are simply stylistic exercises) has its own epiphany, its specific *coup de grace*: in *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*, it is the instant when Shiftlet “felt that the rottenness of the world was about to engulf him.” In *A Temple of the Holy Ghost*, it is the

²⁹ Wood, Ralph C. *Flannery O’Connor and the Christ-haunted South*, Michigan: William B.Eerdmans Publishers, 2004, p124

recognition of the hermaphrodite's human dignity, its status changing from that of a curiosity seen at a fair to that of a temple of the Holy Ghost. In *A Circle in the Fire*, it is when Mrs. Cope, in shock over the fire, drops the mask of rigid self-righteousness, thus revealing an expression that her daughter had never noticed before....In these special moments in which the characters' experience is made pure and universal, there is no place for either the ironic or the grotesque, and God himself seems to live again. Not the triumphant, security-giving God that societies need and constantly restore for their own particular ends, but He who is an open wound....

Belief, in her view, was an instrument for "penetrating reality," not for molding it, and the Catholic novel was nothing more or less than "one in which the truth as Christians know it has been used as a light to see the world by."³⁰

4.2 Flannery O'Connor and Christian Realism

Because O'Connor thought the writing of fiction was always to some degree mysterious, she was skeptical of merely technical approaches to writing. Still, her ideas about fiction writing were largely in agreement with those of the dominant critics in the postwar, and like them she saw the major challenge to her work coming from the popular culture. If her Christian belief exempted her from the characteristic political ennui of the postwar years, it did not remove the problem of the writer's authority in relation to society, but intensified it instead:

Today many readers and critics have set up for the novel a kind of orthodoxy. They demand a realism of fact which may, in the end, limit rather than broaden the novel's scope. They associate the only legitimate material for long fiction with the movement of social forces, with the typical, with fidelity to the way things look and happen in normal life.³¹

³⁰ Robert Milder, *The Protestantism of Flannery O'Connor*, *The Southern Review*, 1975, p802

³¹ Fitzgerald, Sally & Robert, Fitzgerald eds. *Flannery O'Connor: Mystery and Manners*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1963, p66

In order to create forms that would have the abrupt impact of reality upon her readers, the “realism of fact” encouraged its audience to confuse the material world with “the deeper kinds of realism”, so O’Connor determined to violate the conventions of mimetic realism: “a literature which mirrors society would be fit guide for it”. Her favorite tactic for exposing that confusion was to show that material reality in its distorted aspect: “You have to make your vision apparent by shock,” she insists. “To the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures”.³²

In part because of her stated intentions and orientation toward the national culture, these typical devices, assumptions and themes of O’Connor’s *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* bear a remarkable resemblance to the discourse of revisionist liberalism. The imputation to culture and history of a complex ambiguity beyond the reach of reason and ideas, the assumption of human imperfection and ineradicability of evil, the necessity to recognize the limitations of human control and aspiration, her repeated representation of brutal reality in masculine figures---all these elements are commonplaces in the discourses of cold war liberalism. Though she viewed her fiction as a dramatic reprimand to liberal assumptions, the revisionist liberalism of the postwar era was in many respects speaking her language. This dialogic irony not only helps underline the “Christian realism” which informs much of the politics, foreign policy, and historiography of the period, but also suggests the historical character of belief---that it must find expression in terms, figures, themes inextricably produced by, and engaged with, the dialogue of its time.

The historical conditions or provocation of this unintentional echo are commonly described as the crisis of liberalism after World War II. Those somewhat familiar with the discourse of the postwar years will note that O’Connor’s view of her fiction employs many of the assumptions underlying a wide variety of postwar texts, from Niebuhr’s theology to Kennan’s foreign policy. The repeated reversals of O’Connor’s

³² Fitzgerald, Sally & Robert, Fitzgerald eds. *Flannery O’Connor: Mystery and Manners*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1963, p34

fiction thus have a familiar feel to them, for they serve as allegories of the liberal confronted with the evil and violence that liberalism hadn't been prepared to acknowledge. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., for example, had asked, "why was progressivism not prepared for Hitler?"³³ and was explicitly willing to entertain theological explanations of human nature as premises for its new political "realism".

Christian realism and political "realism" were never far apart in the years following World War II, discourses that often reinforced one another in the writings of such men as Schlesinger and Niebuhr. Ironically, then, the premises of O'Connor's work were remarkably consistent with those of the very audience she imagined withering under her attack. "The corruptions of power," Schlesinger wrote, "the desire to exercise it, the desire to increase it, the desire for prostration before it---had no place in progressive calculations."³⁴ The "tragic movements of history in the twentieth century" had amounted---in a telling metaphor---to a "historical re-education" of liberalism.

The southern milieu is a convenience to make articulate the moral hazards of all contemporary life. The idea of "the South" and of "southern writing" also helps to situate O'Connor's collection of stories, for during the fifties specific political cultural meanings were attributed to the southern experience. When Walker Percy won the National Book Award in 1961 for *The Moviegoer*, he was asked why the South was contributing so many fine writers. He answered, "Because we lost the War." O'Connor gave her interpretation of Percy's meaning in an essay she contributed to *esprit*: "He didn't mean by that simply that a lost war makes good subject matter," O'Connor wrote. "We have gone into the modern world with inburnt knowledge of human limitations and with a sense of mystery which could not have developed in our first state of innocence---as it has not sufficiently developed in the

³³ Schaub, Thomas, Hill. *American Fiction in the Cold War*, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991, p124

³⁴ Schaub, Thomas, Hill. *American Fiction in the Cold War*, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991, p125

rest of our country”.³⁵ This is a summary identical to those we can find in the writing of Hartz, Niebuhr and Vann Woodward---all of whom used the experience of the South as a source of directives for United States foreign policy. In the forward to *American Diplomacy*, Kennan described the ironic aura of the Allied victory: “one had the inescapable fact that our security, or what we took to be our security, had suffered a tremendous decline over the course of the half-century. A country which in 1900 had no thought that its prosperity and way of life could be in any way threatened by the outside world had arrived by 1950 at a point where it seemed to be able to think of little else but this danger”.³⁶

Vann Woodward’s essay first restated “the ironic incongruities of our position” and then explored this irony in light of southern history. In Vann Woodward’s opinion, the southern historian can bring a special point of view and experience to these national ironies, and therefore is capable of making “a special contribution to the understanding of the irony of American history.”³⁷

Vann Woodward’s essay helps historicize or situate a pervasive southern conviction within a specific postwar context. The irony of O’Connor’s anti-liberalism is the success of her vision, its marvelous coincidence with dominant discourses of cold war liberalism. One may be perfectly willing to grant the a-historical legitimacy of O’Connor’s religious objections to the modern temper---without, in doing so, ignoring the historical discourses which O’Connor’s language intersects and reinforces. This historicizing allows us to read aspects of her work with an enlarged sense of their cultural dialogue.

Revisionist liberalism is not so explicitly inscribed within the title story of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*. The qualities that make this story so identifiable with the postwar era are more complex, powerfully imbedded in ironic reversals and the themes they accentuate. This is especially clear if we read the fiction through its

³⁵ Fitzgerald, Sally & Robert, Fitzgerald eds. *Flannery O’Connor: Mystery and Manners*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1963, p58-59

³⁶ Gossett, Louise Y. *The Test by Fire: Flannery O’Connor*, Duke University Press, 1965, p75

³⁷ Solotaroff, Theodore. *The Development of Flannery O’Connor*, Atheneum, 1970, p171

allusions to Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*, which bring the irony of southern history to bear upon the Grandmother and her son's family.

In the story, the grandmother's desire differs from her son's: instead of vacationing in Florida, she wants to visit her "connection" in east Tennessee. Her son and his family seem to be interested only in comics, in the "funny papers" and the sports page; they have no eye for beauty in the landscape, no respect for family relations. As in so many of O'Connor's stories, the character who is going to take the hardest fall---here the grandmother---is made to look good by contrast with her son and his family. Bailey is a bald, taciturn father, wearing a Hawaiian shirt with parrots on it. The mother, who is virtually mute, has a face "as broad and innocent as a cabbage" and a kerchief on her head with "two points on the top like rabbit's ears". The children are so disobedient brats who speak in screams and shrieks. In this context, the Grandmother's vitality, her interest in things, however shallow, is refreshing. If we smile at her, we also feel the family line has degenerated a bit. She is stuck with a pretty slow crew. Their lives are a vacuity, they are always on "vacation," and they are headed for Florida, then beginning to incarnate the emptiness and de-regionalization of American culture.

The Grandmother is so taken up with her desire to visit her relations that during the ride she begins to associate the scenery they are passing through with her girlhood landscape, and this association is a recollection at once of her past and of the Old South before the Civil War.

O'Connor further elaborates the Civil War allusion in the scene which follows, describing the soporific car ride after lunch and the confused recollection the Grandmother has of "an old plantation that she had visited in this neighborhood once when she was a young lady. She said the house had six white columns across the front and that there was an avenue of oaks leading up to it and two little wooden trellis arbors on either side in front where you sat down with your suitor after a stroll in the garden".(Collected 153) To induce her son to look for this old house she invents a lie that elaborates and projects her antebellum nostalgia: "There was a secret panel in

this house,” she said craftily, not telling the truth but wishing that she were, “and the story went that all the family silver was hidden in it when Sherman came through but it was never found”. The “secret panel” idea is a hit with the kids and Bailey is forced to capitulate.

The “secret panel”, like the memory generally, is a facile representation of an undefiled South, a secret access to a recoverable past. For the woods, beside which their mother’s overturned car finally comes to rest, are “tall and dark and deep”, and once the Misfit and his gang appear---outside “Toombs-boro” in a “big black battered hearse-like automobile”---the woods become even more threatening: “behind them the line of woods gaped like a dark open mouth”. The family’s mindless, animal appetites here reemerge as instances of nature’s appetite, red in tooth and claw, ready to consume.

The Misfit’s violence, of course, is a form of moral indignation that his experience and his morality do not “match,” and his inability to remember his first crime suggests that the Misfit is human rationality itself, unable to comprehend the affront of mortality as a punishment for man’s original “fall.”

Within the postwar context the Misfit is really a double figure: on the one hand he is a defenseless liberal intellectual; on the other hand he is the reality of violence and evil for which the liberal is unprepared. His is the violence of a simplifying reason imposing its punitive logic upon the recalcitrant complexities of human nature and history.

Before encountering the Grandmother, the Misfit had developed a logic by which he could live, but it was a logic that required disbelief: if Jesus didn’t raise the dead, he explains to her, “then it’s nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can---by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him”. (Collected 153) The possibility that Jesus might have raised the dead throws “everything off balance” and destroys the logic of his behavior. The Grandmother’s gesture testifies to her belief, and it is for this reason that the Misfit is described springing back “as if a snake had bitten him.” The Grandmother’s

gesture violates the consistency of the Misfit's protective logic and removes his last line of defense against the mystery of existence: "The Misfit's eyes were red-rimmed and pale and defenseless-looking". (Collected 157)

Understood in this way, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* turns out to enact one of the central parables of cold war thinking and the "end of ideology"---that the native rationality of liberal idealism produces a greater violence than a belief which recognizes the reality of evil in human behavior. Introducing this story to her audience at Hollins College in Virginia(1962), O'Connor told them, "I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace".³⁸ This is Christian realism with a vengeance.

There are increasing signs that critics want to construct secular readings of O'Connor, readings which acknowledge for Catholicism but interpret the stories for a political subtext. O'Connor's work has recently begun to be re-appraised within the context of the Cold War. For John Lance Bacon, O'Connor's fiction focuses on the cultural climate promoted by the anxiety that Stalin and Sputnik could elicit. Bacon reads her as a dissenting voice in the 1950s age of affluence: "She called attention to the discrepancy between an idealized "American way"... and the social realities produced by this merger of politics and culture. Certainly, O'Connor's career was overshadowed by the Cold War. In 1960 she received a sorority award at an annual luncheon where the speaker, one Mercer Livermore, talked about her community service to the woman behind the men behind the missiles at Cape Canaveral. The Atlantic Journal reported Ms Livermore's comment that women, over all, are more interested in missiles as an important factor in our American defense than men are. Such incidents suggest a culture where buffets and bullets could be found in disturbing proximity. Against such a backdrop (anxiety; heightened national security; the commitment to American nationhood in the face of outside threats) O'Connor's quirky, localized, Catholic fictions might seem to constitute an idiosyncratic, if not a

³⁸ Schaub, Thomas, Hill. *American Fiction in the Cold War*, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991, p32

dissenting, intellectual position.

In her stories O'Connor focused on the South's customs with an anthropologist's eye; her stories are filled with odd turns of expressions, slang, rituals, all illustrating the quiddity of a localized culture. The tales are often about enslavement to ritual, about the futile re-enactment of patterns of behavior which have now become bleached of all meaning. They describe the comedy and tragedy that ensue when her characters find their routines suddenly interrupted or subverted. One early story, *The Geranium*, explores the frustrations borne by an old man who, transported from his Southern home to a bleak New York tenement relies on the positioning of a flower as a consolatory ritual.

Her readings of the South's racial dilemmas are particularly significant, given that O'Connor's career coincided with the growth of Civil Rights in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Her letters contain some extremely acerbic commentary on these matters. She complained, for instance, about the inclusion of an incident involving segregation and Civil Rights in a story by her friend Cecil Dawkins: "It sound as if these things are dragged in to show where the author's sympathies lie; leave it to the NAACP."³⁹ (The NAACP was the national Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the leading Civil Rights group.) Her letters on Civil Rights have a tone of mocking resignation, as when she witnessed a protest: "We are getting pretty smart here in Georgia and are a heap smarter than they are in Alabama. We just let them niggers ride by and waved at them." Although the tone is not that surprising---one imagines that ironic capitulation before the tide of history was a fairly common position amongst educated Southerners---the letters do encourage us to look again at the complex representation of race in O'Connor's fiction. Here, the central text is the extraordinary *The Artificial Nigger*.

Has a story about race ever carried a more provocative title? An elderly man and his grandson (the mother has died---O'Connor's families are typically lopsided or

³⁹ Schaub, Thomas, Hill. *American Fiction in the Cold War*, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991, p35

fractured) travel, for the first time, from their rural home to a nearby city. This, like many O'Connor stories, is a trip of revelation; Nelson will see African-Americans for the first time in his life. The day trip moves from awkwardness towards danger. They find themselves in the black part of town. The child runs into an old woman, and in the ensuing panic Mr. Head refuses to acknowledge that he is related to the boy. It is only on the way home, when they encounter a weird plaster figurine, that the stand-off between the two travelers is resolved.

Taken Flannery O'Connor's first story *Wise Blood* as another example, it happens in Taulkinham, Tennessee, but does not specify exact dates.

Given the events in the story and the time O'Connor wrote it, however, critics set the story sometime in the mid-twentieth century. One event that lends credence to critics' time line for the story is the protagonist's, Hazel Motes, reflection on his stint in the army and the war injury that sent him home. Given the fact that O'Connor wrote the book in the late '40s, and Harcourt published it in 1952, Motes probably served in World War II. The events of the story, then, most likely occur in the latter half of the 1940s. Historically, in the late 1940s after World War II, Americans enjoyed a surge of population growth and prosperity. By 1950, more than 151 million Americans could take advantage of many innovations that would make their lives easier and safer, and their leisure time more enjoyable. For example, technological advances created microwave oven.

Some critics thought Christ's redemption of humanity comprises the main theme of *Wise Blood*. The characters exhibit the qualities of people who have a misdirected sense of spiritual purpose, if they have any spiritual purpose at all. Motes, for example, endeavors to turn his back on his strict religious background by publicly denouncing Christ, engaging in illicit sex, and establishing the "Church Without Christ." Other characters, such as Shoats and Hawks, use religion as a means of making money. Yet as strongly as Motes denies Christ's presence in his life he cannot resist Christ's salvation in the end.

Nevertheless, materialism corrupts mankind. If people focus on acquiring wealth and material goods, then they have little time for spiritual growth and awareness. They will engage in immoral acts because they must ignore the difference between right and wrong to prosper.

Much of the Criticism of Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* (1952) has centered around her themes on redemption. For the most part, such criticism has illustrated and therefore confirmed, through analyses of her fiction, what Miss O'Connor had said about herself that as a writer she is orthodox Christian (specifically Catholic), that her major theme in fiction is the redemption of man by Christ, and that she depicts the grotesque in society. But the critics have ignored a significant point of her personal philosophy that appears as a motif in her fiction: that material prosperity has had ill effects on man's spiritual well-being. It is basic to the grotesqueness in modern society, it stunts man's Spiritual growth, and it makes man's salvation more difficult.

The story of a man named Hazel Motes, who denies his Christianity and takes desperate measures to prove his disbelief, Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* made its debut in 1952. Harcourt Brace published the novel right after O'Connor spent a difficult winter suffering from symptoms that doctors later diagnosed as systemic lupus erythematosus. Critics concur that the disease greatly affected O'Connor's life and work, while they question the specific effects it had on her fiction. Many think that O'Connor's use of the grotesque arose from her own experiences with a disease-ravaged body, yet the general consensus is that O'Connor's religious southern upbringing was the most important influence on her writing.

Wise Blood appeared as Flannery O'Connor's first book in 1952, and she would later describe it as "a comic novel about a Christian *malgré lui*"⁴⁰. It is preoccupied with failed preachers, wrecked automobiles, the denial of vocation and the suffering that accompanies it. The story of Hazel Motes and his failed struggle to escape the shadow of his faith was initially greeted as a satire of religious fanaticism or a

⁴⁰ Wood, Ralph C. *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-haunted South*, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishers, 2004, p55

psychological inquiry into it. However, critics had to reconsider its religious themes after O'Connor's author's note to the 1962 second edition in which she implicitly proclaimed her own faith, declaring: "That belief in Christ is to some a matter of life and death has been a stumbling block for readers who would prefer to think it a matter of no great consequence." Regardless of the way in which one interprets the book's portrayal of religion, the grotesque and comic aspects of the work are indisputably to the forefront and can be seen as trademarks of O'Connor's fiction.

The first chapter of *Wise Blood* was originally a story in O'Connor's master's thesis for the University of Iowa's writer's workshop, and the novel's episodic, almost picaresque structure suggests the way in which she composed the novel, writing numerous stories and vignettes and then editing them into a linear form. The novel begins with Motes travelling across Tennessee from his home in Eastrod to preach in the city of Taulkinham after he is galvanized into a ferocious anti-Christian stance in the course of military service. But Motes's grandfather had been a preacher, and he himself had displayed a tendency towards religious asceticism in his youth, punishing himself for the sight of a naked woman by walking with stones in his shoes. As he enters the city, Jesus is "a wild ragged figure motioning him to turn around and come off into the dark where he was not sure of his footing, where he might be walking on the water and not know it and drown."

In Taulkinham, Motes founds the Church Without Christ and meets Enoch Emory, whose coarse adolescent ambition is a pagan foil to Motes's Christ-haunted desperation. Emory immediately gains a strong attachment to Motes, but Motes is not interested, and the young men take up separate lives in the city, with Motes eventually finding his way to the brothel of Lenora Watts and purchasing a car that promises to bring him freedom. The city, however, offers him no escape from religious signs and symbols, and he becomes fascinated by a by a blind preacher, Asa Hawks.

In a park Motes comes upon Enoch Emory spying on a mother and her sons as they swim, and follows the younger man on his daily journey through the city, which

culminates with a visit to a museum to view a mummy – what Emory calls a “shrivelled man”. Motes himself has been “wound tighter and tighter” throughout this episode, and eventually he demands the address of Asa Hawks from Emory before appearing to hit him on the head with a rock and leaving. In the next chapter Motes promptly moves into the house where the preacher and his daughter, Sabbath Lily Hawks, are boarding. Hawks tells Motes that he once promised to blind himself with lime at a religious meeting, but he does not reveal that he lost his nerve at the last second and can still see properly. Meanwhile, during a trip together in Motes's car, Sabbath Lily shocks Motes by explaining that she is Hawks's illegitimate child. Soon after, the car breaks down along a country road and she tries unsuccessfully to seduce Motes.

For his part, Enoch Emory feels a change come upon him and, following the materialist imperatives of his blood, he makes pledges to be tidy and save money in a bid to move his life in new directions. He comes across Motes, who is still resisting the call of his own blood and preaching for the Church Without Christ, which he claims it is “the church peaceful and satisfied”. Motes's sermon is interrupted by a man claiming to be called Onnie Jay Holy who pretends to be Motes's disciple. Holy is a flim-flam man whose real name is Hoover Shoats. Despite Motes's protests he unilaterally renames Haze's religious movement the Holy Church of Christ Without Christ, promising the audience that its teachings are all understandable and thus trustworthy.

Motes returns home and, on an impulse, picks the lock of Asa Hawks's room. In disturbing the Hawks's sleep with a lit match, Motes realizes the man is not blind after all. Furthermore, when he returns to the street he finds that Shoats has replaced him with another con-artist preacher, Solace Layfield. With his church co-opted from him, Motes turns to sex with Sabbath Lily. Meanwhile, Enoch Emory steals the “shrivelled man”, whom he sees as the “new Jesus”. He leaves it in the care of Sabbath Lily and she treats it as her child until the disillusioned Motes sees it and throws it against a wall. Emory has his own moment of disenchantment when he

attempts to shake the hand of the film star Gonga the gorilla and discovers the creature is actually a man in a suit. After delivering the shrivelled man to Sabbath Lily for Motes, Emory pursues the Gonga character, beats him and steals the costume. When Emory burns his old clothes and dons the suit himself he feels another transformation occur. The reader's last glimpse of him is at the edge of the city, viewing the skyline.

Meanwhile, Motes engages in his own pursuit – of Solace Layfield, the hired prophet. He follows him, runs his car into a ditch, forces Layfield to take off his preaching suit, and then runs over him. Haze realizes that he had hoped to save himself through blasphemy, “but that you couldn't even believe in that because then you were believing in something to blaspheme”. He begins to drive to another city, but an arbitrarily malicious police officer stops and pushes his car over an embankment. Motes is forced to walk back to Taulkinham where he promptly blinds himself with lime. In the novel's denouement he is living on a government pension given to him because of “something the war had done to his insides”, and is cared for by Sabbath Lily. Their landlady, Mrs. Flood, narrates the last section, describing Motes's ascetic life of walking on glass and stones and strapping barbed wire around his chest. She wants to marry him, but he leaves the house and is eventually found in a ditch by the police, dying soon after.

Wise Blood initially received a mixed response from an audience unfamiliar with the religious ferocity of O'Connor's fiction, but it gained a somewhat more nuanced appreciation with the second edition and author's note ten years later. Its slight characterizations, and allegorical and episodic plot, suggest the newness of the novel form for O'Connor. However, *Wise Blood* is notable for the determination with which its parabolic style is executed and for its demonstration of O'Connor's stark humour.

Wise Blood is a savage satire of America's secular, commercial culture, as well as the humanism it holds so dear (“Dear Sabbath,” Mary Brittle writes back, “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.”⁴¹)

The organization of *Wise Blood* is a tight network of imagery, symbolism and foreshadowing. The plot of the novel is much less tight, since the whole episode of Enoch and the gorilla suit is unrelated to Haze, and Enoch simply falls out of the book dresses as a gorilla. The language similarly shows that Miss O'Connor had not reached the full control of her material. Some of it represents the perfect plain style of her later triumphs, but some of the tropes are so garish or elaborate as to be distracting, and thus to be ineffective.

Hazel Motes, O'Connor's would-be nihilist protagonist, preaches a "Church without Christ" with all the zealous fervor of Zoellick's devotion to "Free Trade" without free trade. Lurking in the novel is Zoellick's real doppelganger, Asa Hawkes, the fake-blind preacher who cons people into parting with their money, believing he blinded himself for his faith.

Here he is on Hazel Motes, the Oedipally self-blinded hero of O'Connor's first novel, *Wise Blood*:

Hazel Motes is not a prophet or a saint or a wise man or even a religious believer--not yet. He is a person walking in darkness, a blind man stabbing the ground with his cane. Walking in darkness *is* his religious experience, not merely the context for it... Faith (in the catechetical formulation of the period) is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen, and Motes's blindness, at best, is a recognition that the proof of Jesus' divinity that he yearns for cannot be seen with the eyes only, and that nothing he might see, no miracle or act of blasphemy, can tell him whether or not to believe.⁴²

Wise Blood is one of the best books ever written in the English language. Flannery O'Connor pioneered the dark heart of the existential hero.

⁴¹ Margaret, Earley, Whitt. *Understanding Flannery O'Connor*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997, p213

⁴² Gossett, Louise Y. *The Test by Fire: Flannery O'Connor*, Duke University Press, 1965, p76

These three Catholics were well aware of the post-war premise that perhaps there exists nothing beyond the immediate present. Although existentialism and its concept of "angst" were provocative to Fitzgeralds, all this was even more challenging to O'Connor. Her unsystematic manuscript with its multiplicity of southern characters and settings began to shift in detail and direction, revealing the extent to which O'Connor herself was becoming concerned with the ideas of existentialism.

Her prospectus for *Wise Blood*, written in 1984, states her original direction:

The principle character, an illiterate Tennessean, has lost his home through the breakdown of a country community. Home in this instance, stands not only for the place and family, but for some absolute belief which would give him sanctuary in the modern world. All he has retained of the evangelical religion of his mother is a sense of sin and a need for religion....This sense of sin is the only key he has to finding a sanctuary and he begins unconsciously to search for God through sin.⁴³

As she wrote, discovering her own ideas and absorbing new ones, the manuscript grew to well over a thousand pages. Indefatigable, she rewrote and refined the piece, gradually bringing it around to a serious parody on existentialism. Hazel Motes, her main character, finally emerges as a young man who has lost his childhood faith while in army, and sets off to the city to "preach the Church without Christ, the church peaceful and satisfied." Placing his faith in material reality, Hazel says: "I'm a member and preacher to the church where the blind don't see and the lame don't walk and what's dead stays that way. Ask me about that church and I'll tell you it's the church that the blood of Jesus doesn't foul with Redemption."

Hazel Motes, protagonist of *Wise Blood*, is an accidental prophet. Though the novel precedes the much better *The Violent Bear It Away*, it can be read as a sort of sequel to that novel - what might have happened to young Tarwater if we were allowed to see his adventures in the city.

Motes goes around the city in the evenings, preaching the Church Without Christ,

⁴³ Walters, Dorothy. *Flannery O'Connor*, Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1973, p65

a church in which the individual is free from the 'bleeding stinking mad shadow of Jesus' - freed from tradition, from dogma, from traditional notions of salvation. Motes preaches the coming of a new Jesus - a contemporary that modern (or post-modern) people can relate to.

In his quest, Motes is pursued by two individuals, Sabbath Hawks, the daughter of a blind false prophet, and Enoch Emery, a wannabe disciple. Emery wants very badly to find that new Jesus and receive a revelation from him.

Full of strange and compelling, if somewhat distant characters, including a small mummy and a gorilla suit, *Wise Blood* does not have the plot flow of *The Violent Bear It Away*, and it is a little more haphazard, but it is a wonderful first glance into Flannery O'Connor's genius fictional mind, possessed with finding Christ in existentialism with or without Kierkegaard.

A quick and easy read, *Wise Blood* portrays a series of unforgettably creepy losers in haunting, disturbing scenes. Hazel Motes, a soldier discharged from the army because of an injury, becomes a street-corner preacher for the nihilistic "Church Without Christ" (with a congregation of one). He meets, and can't shake off, a friendless and troubled adolescent, and the two of them subsequently encounter an alcoholic charlatan who pretends to be a blind preacher and who hopes somehow to take advantage of Hazel by getting him to marry his young daughter. Eventually, Hazel acquires a congregant for his atheistic church, but the first disciple rebels and sets up his own ministry. There's so much more that happens, and I certainly won't give away the finale, but those who have already read the book will be intrigued by the knowledge that O'Connor decided how to end the novel after reading Sophocles. *Wise Blood*, the work which stands out from the rest, emphasizing the *violence* of transcendence rather than the *love*, is for me perhaps the most challenging of the four works I have considered in this essay. I include it because it fits, but does not fit neatly; I do not want to appear to be making a case that the notion of transcendence is easy, that it is a mawkish prescription for one-size-fits-all literary sentimentality. Fragmentation-is a kind of agony; the attempt to transcend that agony, like God's

mercy in O'Connor's writing, *burns*. Hazel Motes, in some ways a perfect postmodern figure (especially in his strenuous-yet unconvincing-refusal of the "grand narrative" of a transcendent vision), brings this essay full circle. His self-inflicted blindness allows him to see-or at least to *search*-for the "wild ragged figure" of the divine, while Arjuna's receiving, from Krishna, of "divine eyes," or "spiritual vision" (XI.8), is what allows him to see Krishna in his true, transcendent state. For highly self-conscious postmoderns, transcendence is no longer a gift from a god who supports and maintains all things; for us, transcendence is found only after a long and painful search, and sometimes we are damaged-blinded?-by the search itself. Like Hazel Motes, we may not find what we expected to find, if indeed we find anything at all, but the *search itself* is what is necessary.

4.3 Flannery O'Connor's Involvement with Philosophies

O'Connor's stories and novels do develop philosophical themes. In fact, one of O'Connor's most common types is the modern intellectual struggling for significance and permanence in a world of alienation, fragmentation, and transience. Hazel, Rayber, Hulga all suffer existential encounters with nothingness as the philosophers of her day defined them.

The author does not contradict Sister Bernetta Quinn's statement that in order to understand Flannery O'Connor "one must read and meditate upon the Bible."⁴⁴ Many stories, however, cannot be understood unless readers also consider other contexts, especially those related to modernist thought.

According to O'Connor, modern fiction explores "the mystery of personality," which she conceives as "the general mystery of incompleteness". The divided self in literature refers to characters with an uncertain sense of identity---a sense of incompleteness. When the boundaries of a character's self are unclear, he or she

⁴⁴ Coles, Robert. *Flannery O'Connor's South*, Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1981, p110

depends on the identity of someone else, usually the parent, to establish self-worth. In the forties, fifties, and sixties when O'Connor was writing, Freud's theories of the divided self were widely discussed by academics and writers alike. Psychoanalytic approaches are essential to any basic understanding of O'Connor's stories.

O'Connor's characters frequently exhibit symptoms that are unmistakably Freudian: they suffer internal conflicts because of their own narcissism and regressive behavior, like Hazel, Tarwater.

We find in the first novel some of the most comic moments in O'Connor's art and some of the most grotesque---especially when considering the allusions to infanticide, self-blinding with lye as an affirmation of faith, and murder. One of the more comic incidents demonstrates the central issue in the novel---that of adjusting to modern life. Sabbath Lily, the preacher's daughter, writes the newspaper for advice about whether she should "neck or not" because she is "a bastard and a bastard shall not enter the kingdom of heaven" anyway. She is not satisfied with the response to her letter: "your real problem is one of adjustment to the modern world. Perhaps you ought to reexamine your religious values to see if they meet your needs in life. A religious experience can be a beautiful addition to living if you can put it in the proper perspective and don't let it warf you." Sabbath Lily replies: "What I really want to know is should I go the whole hog or not? That's my real problem. I'm adjusted okay to the modern world."(Collected 34)

None of O'Connor's characters are adjusted to the modern world, but every possible method of achieving some kind of adjustment is explored---from promoting the Church without Christ to murdering those who represent a more vulnerable aspect of the self in order to affirm power over death. Hazel Motes, *The Misfit of Wise Blood*, tries both of these methods to "adjust," among others. We tend to focus on his grotesque attempts to adjust rather than on the gestures of love found in the novel, gestures that might have succeeded. Enoch and Mrs. Flood try to befriend this perverse "hero," but he rebuffs everyone. While Hazel's rebellion against the Southern Protestantism that alienates him from his community is satirized in this

novel, his nihilism does not help his "adjustment."

This novel was, in fact, one of the first works that critics and readers tried to understand, but it might have been better understood after first reading the stories. The stories more readily develop our appreciation for O'Connor's comic impulse and clearly express her focus on the importance of community and on the simple gestures of love that might finally help us to adjust to the modern world. Hazel's alienation from his community and his inability to love result in psychic fragmentation. Mrs. Flood sees in his eyes at the end a mere "pinpoint of light"---his humanity nearly snuffed out.

Besides considering the philosophical and psychological currents of O'Connor's time, readers need some background in the major theories of the then-fashionable New Critical creed---especially shaped by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, the critics O'Connor studied.

The New Critics directed the reader's attention to a close reading of the work itself, its overall structure, its dynamic form, its style, the relation of parts to one another, tensions between the literal sense of the work and its implications---between that which is denoted and that which is connoted; between the concrete level and the abstract. Most New Critics emphasized that each fictional work or poem represents a totally unique depiction of reality, and further, each reader's re-experience of the work is a kind of recreation. In sum, the New Critics admired complex literature that dramatically rendered concrete experience in all its particulars, suggestively arranged to convey indirectly the author's experience and ideas. They assumed a reader willing and able to grapple with the complexities of the work---willing to contemplate subtle implications, complicated structures, and multiple levels of meaning.

Because "The modern novelist merges the reader in experience", as O'Connor explains it, the reader must analyze carefully whether or not the protagonist expresses the author's sentiments. More often than not, subtle ironies are at play, and O'Connor's characters express ideas that the author would condemn. She uses a limited, third-person perspective that at times expresses the authorial voice but at

other times (in the same story) reveals only the protagonist's views, not to be confused with the author's. In fact, this special kind of dramatic irony is one of O'Connor's most common techniques. For example, Thomas in *The Comforts of Home* is shown looking out of the window at his mother who is driving up with a juvenile-delinquent woman and planning to offer their home as a mission of charity, against her son's will. We are presented with Thomas peering down at this woman, and we are told that "the little slut" got out of the car. The judgment that the girl is a "slut" is surely the jealous Thomas's thought and not O'Connor's authorial judgment. In fact, Thomas's mother keeps reminding her son that this woman is not so different from him.

Then, readers should take a complex view of O'Connor's art---allowing for the influence of New Criticism and considering the intellectual, cultural, and social context of the modern period.

The existentialist and the Catholic share certain important concerns and values: the acceptance of despair and an awareness of human mortality as a means of heightening one's moral sense, the emphasis on the developing individual, the ideal of responsibility for one's actions, the importance of freedom and choice, and the assertion that individuals must establish a proper relation to their community, thereby overcoming alienation and psychic fragmentation.

O'Connor's characters who suffer a fear of death and are alienated from self and society are divided against themselves. There are many different kinds of conflicts within the human psyche (conflicts between masculine and feminine, between self and society), but the conflict between mind and body is fundamental. The double figure reflects the sense of dividedness suffered as humankind becomes more and more aware of the disparity between spiritual aspirations and animal instincts, between the quest for immortality and the reality of physical decay. Being tied to what most human beings feel is decaying animal or body naturally leads to an acute awareness of physical processes and a desire to be more than mere flesh. Alienation from the physical self leads to alienation from the human community.

Nowhere in O'Connor's works are the theme of alienation and the fear of death more evident than in *The Geranium*. The struggle to overcome mortality by establishing one's significance apart from others is clear; Dudley refuses to relate constructively to his daughter and his neighbors. This sedentary and alienated old man spends his last days staring out the window at his neighbor's geranium, which is perched on a windowledge high above the abyss of a multi-storied apartment complex in New York. The precarious position of the geranium refers us to Dudley's own situation---and to the image of "dangling man" as the existentialists have defined it or to the image of man as "a rope over an abyss",⁴⁵ as Nietzsche has envisioned the human predicament.

Establishing the right relationship to community is a major theme of O'Connor's. In *Good Country People*, Hulga feels herself to be insignificant repetition in the long procession of human life. She is overwhelmed by an identity crisis because they cannot maintain "difference" established by achieving a secure place in the social hierarchy. On the one hand, O'Connor represents the human tendency to form social aggregates and to identify with classes in power. Then it seems clear that social hierarchies develop out of the desire to prove individual significance and to gain power over others through conformity to the group. On the other hand, rebel character types like Hulga isolate themselves from others and defy the social order to transcend the group will.

O'Connor's works are equipped with grotesque characters, fragmented forms, discontinuous narratives, and random-seeming collages of different materials just like postmodernism. No matter what means the modern men resort to adjust to the world around them, they failed in the end.

⁴⁵ Edmondson, Henry T. *Return to Good and Evil: Flannery O'Connor's Response to Nihilism*, Oxford: Lexington Books, 2002, p24

Chapter Five Conclusion

Until now the paper has made a systematic study on the postmodernism flavor in O'Connor's works that are far from redemption by concentrating on the textual evidence. Therefore, O'Connor's postmodernism features under the cover of Christian context have been thoroughly analyzed in this paper.

At the outset of this paper, the traditionally held belief in the opposites: good/evil and god/devil has been reversed. The author reviews the ambiguous boundary in each pair. Evidently, O'Connor's adroit manipulation of the opposites contributes effectively to the development of her postmodernism coloring.

Moreover, based upon the firm textual evidence, the author dismantles the contradictory figurative devices and techniques inherent in O'Connor's works in three respects. First, her fiction needs elaborate and detailed interpreting because of the employment of inconsistent symbols. Second, the around surroundings and other images hinder the characters from being redeemed. Then, the grammar of negation makes her works harder to be interpreted.

In the final chapter of the main body of this thesis, the reasons for the above contradictions have been probed. Given the fact that O'Connor was born in a Christian family, the author at first throws a new light on the relation between O'Connor and the Christian or rather Catholic writers. In addition to this, the author discloses the connections between Christian realism and political realism. Furthermore, considering modern men's quest for "belonging", postmodernism, existentialism as well as nihilism comes under scrutiny. Every possible method of achieving some kind of adjustment is explored, but none of O'Connor's characters are adjusted to the modern world.

Flannery O'Connor's mastery is suggested by the intense critical response to her work--- a response that has prevented us from truly understanding the complexity of her art and from seeing ways to reconcile contradictory judgments about her

characters. Her ability to involve us emotionally in the life of her work should not blind us to the need for rationally contemplating her stories in light of the fullest range of implications given the complexity of her mind and methods. Her interests in the social, psychological, philosophical, and theological issues of modern times must be considered.

In conclusion, the significance of O'Connor's genesis of her works can never be isolated from her tendency towards postmodernism as well as the historical and social contexts within which the stories were conceived. In final analysis, what gives Flannery O'Connor's work a depth not found in many writers who deal with the same sort of material is her view of the modern world from the standpoint of philosophy and theology.

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Appendix for Published Academic Papers

安徽大学学报《浅析〈李尔王〉中的基督教色彩》2004.第五期
p174-176

滁州学院学报《再读〈献给爱米丽的玫瑰〉——论主人公爱米丽的影子性》2006.第二期 p45-49