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Elements of Fiction in Flannery O'Connor:  
Religion, Humor, and the Grotesque

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### Elements of Fiction in Flannery O'Connor

When asked to name the chief influences on her life, Flannery O'Connor once stated, "Probably...being a Catholic, and a Southerner, and a writer" (Walters 17). These three influences emerge in the fiction of O'Connor as she demonstrates her devout faith and Southern identity in her themes of Christianity, tragic humor, and the grotesque. O'Connor said of her fiction, "The look of this fiction is going to be wild...it is almost of necessity going to be violent and comic, because of the discrepancies it seeks to combine" (Walters 7). O'Connor's elements of fiction have been termed Christian tragicomedy: tragic because of its elements of the grotesque, often violent, events and characters in the stories, and comic because of the author's knack for achieving humor in the midst of this violence.

The most striking element in O'Connor's works is that of Christianity. O'Connor believed that a writer's function could only be stated in terms of religion; "I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and what I see in the world I see in its relation to that" (Nisly 84). O'Connor considered her own religious attitudes in opposition to the popular attitude of the time, and she made concessions in her fiction for this fact. She claimed that readers misunderstood

her stories because the readers are “wingless chickens”: “the moral sense has been bred out of certain sections of the population, like the wings have been bred off certain chickens to produce more white meat on them. This is a generation of wingless chickens, which I suppose is what Nietzsche meant when he said God was dead” (Nisly 85). O’Connor insists that her Roman Catholicism serves not as an inhibitor but a foundation for her fiction writing (Nisly 85). “All my stories are about the action of grace on a character who is not very willing to support it, but most people think of these stories as hard, hopeless, brutal, etc.” (Nisly 85). Stanley Edgar Hyman said, “Christ is the real hero of O’Connor’s fiction. He is her ideal, the paradigm against which she measures her characters to see if they are good or bad, sick or well, damned or saved” (DiRenzo 20). One of the most notable effects of O’Connor’s religious viewpoint on her work was her introduction of the mystery surrounding Christianity; O’Connor felt that faith was mysterious, and she carried this mystery over to the religious scenes in her works. It is this spiritual mystery that gives way to another element in O’Connor’s writing, the grotesque.

O’Connor was convinced that her readers were far too removed from religious doctrine to understand the mystery she found central to her faith; because of this, she found it necessary to shock the reader by forcing him or her to “confront mystery through the grotesque” (Nisly 89). The grotesque finds its way into O’Connor’s fiction by way of surprise and suddenness as well as in characterization. Many of O’Connor’s characters are presented with physical deformities in order to show their contrast with the “whole” man, specifically

Christ. Her characters are both beautiful and ugly, impressive and ludicrous. They have a monumental quality despite the grotesque elements of their characters. In describing her technique of achieving the mystery of faith through the grotesque in her stories, O'Connor said that the grotesque grew naturally out of her view of the world: "My own feeling is that writers who see by the light of their Christian faith will have, in these times, the sharpest eye for the grotesque, for the perverse, and for the unacceptable....The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural" (Nisly 89). O'Connor said, "When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal means of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock" (Nisly 89). This use of the grotesque leads into another element in O'Connor's fiction, humor.

Humor plays a major role in the fiction of O'Connor and is often closely connected with the grotesque. O'Connor plays the violence of the grotesque against the comedy of the actual story lines; her humor arises in the midst of catastrophic events, her seriousness in the midst of ludicrousness. She has described her work as humorous: "Mine is a comic art, but that does not detract from its seriousness" (Walters 25). The reader is forced to see the world as full of figures essentially laughable in their qualities and responses to situations. "Our initial reaction may be a superior grin at the spectacle of a world teeming with inanity. But through our laughter, we are involved; and we are led to reflect

upon the most serious questions of human experience" (Walters 25).

Three stories which demonstrate O'Connor's crucial elements of religion, the grotesque, and humor are from her collection *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, "The River," "Good Country People," and "A Circle in the Fire." "The River" has been called O'Connor's "most theologically puzzling" story. In it, O'Connor's main character is a boy of four or five who lives in such a "wasteland" with his parents that he is forever changed after one day with Mrs. Connin, the babysitter. Harry is constantly being thrown around from sitter to sitter, a custom of his parents as they recover from their hangovers each morning. The boy tells Mrs. Connin that his name is Bevel, which is actually the preacher's name, demonstrating the boy's struggle to identify himself in a world of confusion. Bevel has an experience unlike any he has ever had, as he is taken to "the river" and baptized. The boy, who's real name is Harry, has a day full of new insights into a world he never knew, the world of spiritual people. He is introduced to Jesus Christ through a painting, a picture of a man with "long hair and a gold circle around his head...sawing on a board while some children stood watching" (O'Connor 161). Mrs. Connin gives Harry his first lesson in religion as he learns he has been made by this carpenter.

O'Connor introduces the element of religion into this story as a basis for its text; the work centers around the effect the baptism has on a young soul. Harry goes searching for the kingdom of heaven in the river the next day and drowns; O'Connor uses this as an example of the grotesque, the death of an innocent soul to show her didactic message. Many religious elements exist in "The River."

In addition to the obvious elements of the river and the baptism scene, the name changing of Harry to Bevel can be likened to Saul's change of names to Paul on the Road to Damascus (Ragan 8). Harry realizes that he is on a new road, an unfamiliar one, and changes his name to Bevel to celebrate his new enlightenment of the previously unfamiliar world around him. He is introduced to the evil in the world first through Mrs. Connin's three sons as they trick him into letting the pig out. As he looks with Mrs. Connin at her book *The Life of Jesus Christ for Readers Under Twelve*, he sees a picture of Jesus delivering demons out of a man into a herd of swine, a biblical reference to the Luke 8:32 account. Harry learns that when he is baptized he will count as he "didn't even count before" (O'Connor 168). Harry decides the next day to search for the river again, wanting to find "the Kingdom of Christ in the river," where the preacher had said it was the day before (O'Connor 173). He finds the river and then realizes that the "kingdom" is not there and is just "another joke" (O'Connor 173). Harry fights the water and, when he sees Mr. Paradise, aptly named, coming after him, is swept up by the current and realizes that now he is "getting somewhere" (O'Connor 174). By swimming away from "Paradise," he is pulled toward the *paradise* he seeks, the real Kingdom of God.

O'Connor uses all her elements in this story: religion, the grotesque, and humor. The storyline is based on religious issues, most importantly, baptism. She presents the young preacher as the archetypal Christian, a model of an austere religious image; he tells the people "Believe Jesus or the devil!...Testify to one or the other!" (O'Connor 166). O'Connor has a medium for expressing

her own personal views through this preacher; she has him speak for her, in a sense. The fact that the story ends with the death of an innocent child is an example of O'Connor's use of the grotesque. Because of his parents' neglect, Harry is pushed to find something else, something more to life to fill the gap vacated by his parents. Another element of the grotesque in the story is Mr. Paradise, a figure described almost monster-like with a growth of cancer on his ear; to Harry he looks like a pig, a reference O'Connor uses two-fold. O'Connor uses this man to show that humans, at their basest, most evil level, resemble beasts, and she makes him resemble a pig to Harry in order to refer to the earlier passage of Christ delivering the devil from the swine, thus compounding the man's grotesque nature. The humorous elements in the story occur sporadically throughout, often in the midst of a serious scene. After Mrs. Connin's statement to Harry that he was made by Jesus Christ, Harry notes that before he had thought that "Jesus Christ was a word like 'oh' or 'damn' or 'God' or maybe somebody who had cheated them out of something sometime" (O'Connor 163). Another humorous moment comes when Mrs. Connin tells Harry they are going to a healing, and Harry says, "Will he heal me?" When asked of what he wants to be healed, Harry replies, "I'm hungry" (O'Connor 159).

Another story which demonstrates these elements as well is "Good Country People." In the story, O'Connor uses a characterization she often employs, matching a physical deformity with a spiritual affliction; in this case the character is Hulga who has only one leg, a weak heart, and is an atheist. According to one critic, "Flannery O'Connor persists in referring to three things



about Hulga which have a way of recurring like leitmotifs: her artificial leg, the symbolical change of her name from Joy to Hulga, and her Ph.D. Hulga's given name is Joy, but she changed her name to Hulga in order to infuriate and hurt her mother, at which she succeeded. The name choice of Joy is important as it is a critical part of Christianity and religion, with Christians often characterizing their lives as joyful with the influence and love of Christ. Yet this woman named Joy doesn't even believe in God, and changed her name in order to prove the ruin of her mother's plans. The narrator says, "Her name was really Joy but as soon as she was twenty-one and away from home, she had had it legally changed. Mrs. Hopewell was certain that she had thought until she had hit upon the ugliest name in any language" (O'Connor 274).

In the story, the reader is introduced to the foil characters of Mrs. Freeman and Mrs. Hopewell, Mrs. Freeman being one of the so-called "good country people." The characters provide contrasts for Hulga, who is very condescending and proud; O'Connor connects Hulga's atheism with her physical imperfections. She lost a leg when she was young and now has a prosthetic leg, a fact which O'Connor uses to illuminate her own viewpoint on the importance of religion to life and living. Because of her imperfections, the reader is forced to see the physical problems of Hulga which emphasize her spiritual imperfections. Her personality is detailed quite thoroughly through the tales of situations with her mother and Mrs. Freeman that have occurred. One such instance is retold by the narrator about the times when Hulga's mother would ask her for help:

Her remarks were usually so ugly and her face so glum that Mrs. Hopewell

would say, 'If you can't come pleasantly, I don't want you at all,' to which the girl, standing square and rigid-shouldered with her neck thrust slightly forward, would reply, 'If you want me, here I am—LIKE I AM.' (O'Connor 274)

This attitude which resembles that of a spoiled child gives the reader insight into the character of one of the key players in the story.

Further into the story when a "simple" Bible salesman comes to the house and stays for dinner, the reader sees a different side of Hulga. Throughout the story, Hulga's intelligence is detailed and her intellectual superiority over all others she is in contact with is emphasized. In the Bible salesman, Hulga sees an opportunity to seduce the younger man, another of the "good country people." Yet when the two go on a picnic, Hulga realizes that Manley is not so simple and has seductive motives also. He strips her of her spiritual naiveté and steals her prosthetic leg. Hulga, the woman with the doctorate who had thought of herself as beyond all trickery and as one totally in touch with reality, was fooled by the boy she planned to seduce. O'Connor shows the existence of evil in even the most seemingly innocent; Manley on the surface seems to be totally innocent and with wholesome intentions, yet he proves to be a wolf in sheep's clothing.

O'Connor sets up an opposition of Christianity and atheism along with the spiritual and intellectual in "Good Country People." Hulga represents the epitome of the intellectual with no faith whatsoever; she believes she knows everything about the ins and outs of the world. At one point in the story O'Connor's narrator directly addresses the opposition of science and religion; the narrator tells a

story of Mrs. Hopewell picking up one of Hulga's philosophical science books and reading from it, states, "Science, on the other hand, has to assert its soberness and seriousness afresh and declare that it is concerned solely with what-is..." She shut the book quickly and went out of the room as if she were having a chill" (O'Connor 277). In this instance the reader sees the direct opposition that science poses for Christianity as it is concerned with only the "what-is" and Christianity is based upon the theory of faith and believing what one cannot see. Throughout the story, this opposition is demonstrated, down to the final comparison of the Bible salesman representing faith, though an obviously skewed one, and Hulga representing science and reason, getting fooled despite her intellectual abilities. She imagines taking advantage of Manley's innocence, playing "intellectual Eve to this untouched Adam" (Walters 67). His true nature is revealed, as he has in his Bible selling suitcase, whiskey, contraceptives, and pornographic cards. When Hulga realizes her misconception, she says, "Aren't you... just good country people?" to which Manley replies, "I hope you don't think...that I believe in that crap! I may sell Bibles but I know which end is up and I wasn't born yesterday and I know where I'm going!" (O'Connor 290).

By having the main character be an invalid with a heart condition, O'Connor introduces the grotesque into the story. The outrageously grotesque items which Manley collects, a collection to which he adds Hulga's leg, are another example of this element. Manley states, "I've got a lot of interesting things....One time I got a woman's glass eye this way" (O'Connor 291). The idea that Manley, a Bible salesman, collects such items as prosthetic legs and

glass eyes is undoubtedly an example of the grotesque; his obsession, along with Mrs. Freeman's actually, with the items of unique and unusual circumstance and situation demonstrate the power of the grotesque over people and provide an apropos connection to the next element in the story, humor, as these items are so absurd they are often found as comic.

The humor in the story is found in numerous places, ranging from the descriptions of the items that Manley collects to the different items he brings with him in the suitcase: a flask of whiskey, pornographic cards, and contraception. It is oddly humorous to most readers that the woman who planned to seduce and dominate the "simple" salesman is getting duped herself. Most of the traditional comedy is concentrated in the conversations between Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman, and often is found in references to Mrs. Freeman's always entertaining daughters. One such example of a humorous conversation between the two women is when Mrs. Hopewell tells Mrs. Freeman that she is the wheel behind the wheel and Mrs. Freeman replies with "I know it. I've always been quick. It's some that are quicker than others" (O'Connor 273). The humor lies in the fact that both women think they know exactly what they are talking about but they often get lost in the diction of their conversations and miss the real point. The women's never-ending use of trite phrases such as "Everybody is different," "It takes all kinds to make the world," "Nothing is perfect," "That is life," "Well other people have their opinions too," and "I always said it did myself" provide numerous instances of humor as well.

A last example of O'Connor's work which includes these recurring themes

is "A Circle in the Fire." In this story, the reader is introduced to Mrs. Cope and Mrs. Pritchard, who are foils for each other, along with Mrs. Cope's daughter Sally Virginia. The widowed Mrs. Cope is the boss of the farm and it is undoubtedly her most prized possession. Mrs. Cope is a complex character as she changes throughout the story and emerges enlightened. She is unremittingly telling Mrs. Pritchard and her own daughter to be thankful for what they have, stating, "Think of all we have. Lord...we have everything" (O'Connor 177). She asks everyone she comes in contact with if they thank God for their blessings and overtly judges them if they do not. In one scene with Mrs. Pritchard, Mrs. Cope tells her, "Every day you should say a prayer of thanksgiving. Do you do that?" (O'Connor 177). When the three boys come to her farm, Mrs. Cope seizes the moment to address thanking God for their blessings, telling them, "We have so much to be thankful for,' she said suddenly in a mournful marveling tone. 'Do you boys thank God every night for all He's done for you? Do you thank him for everything?'" (O'Connor 184). After their embarrassed silence, she tells them, "Well, I know I do" (O'Connor 184). This statement is very condescending, an element of spirituality which is not thought highly of; Christians are told not to judge, yet she obviously thinks of herself as better than the three boys and Mrs. Pritchard because she "thanks God" for all He does.

Mrs. Cope's spirituality is one more of fear than true faith, which becomes most obvious in the ending. Her greatest fear is that someone will get hurt on her property and sue her, or that someone will set fire to the woods. Although she seems to be a Christian woman, thankful for her blessings, she contradicts

this idea in a statement to Mrs. Pritchard by implying that the things she has are not gifts from God but something she merited through hard work; she states, “I have the best kept place in the country and do you know why? Because I work. I’ve had to work to save this place and work to keep it” (O’Connor 178). Mrs. Cope appreciates the fact that God has not taken everything from her, but she, possibly unknowingly, rejects the idea that God might have granted her the blessings, not her own hard work. O’Connor uses this medium of Mrs. Cope to once again put forward an example of Christian hypocrisy as Mrs. Cope is a malevolent Christian who will have a fall from grace. One critic says that O’Connor uses the three boys and Mrs. Cope as a biblical allusion to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and King Nebuchadnezzar (Whitt 69). The fire resembles the fiery furnace they were thrown into in Daniel 3; “the king understands that there is a God more powerful than the golden image he was demanding his people to worship; Mrs. Cope feels anew the old misery that she cannot comprehend” (Whitt 69). This misery is her fear of God’s power and her own powerlessness, and the boys, by destroying the precious woods and the property she so dearly prizes, leave Mrs. Cope powerless.

The grotesque in the story is found in the surprise and suddenness of the fire, the boys’ evil natures, their desire to do evil to Mrs. Cope, to ride the forbidden horses, to go into the barn where they are not allowed, and ultimately, to set the forest ablaze. The language that the boys use and the phrases they repeat provide some examples of the grotesque in the story; when the young boy is relating the boys’ desires to come to the farm, he states “Goddam, it was

a horse down there name Gene and if I had him here I'd bust this concrete to hell riding him!" (O'Connor 182).

Some critics point out the importance of the young child in the story as a potential prophet. The "child" as she is called does not speak very often, but what she does say is powerful and often surprising. She remains the distant observer, watching the events unfold from an upper window. The child "sees more deeply than anyone else into the disaster which serves as her mother's salvation" (Friedman 173). Mrs. Cope is constantly ignoring the suffering of other people, especially those who suffer at her own hand. "Whatever the meanness exhibited by the three boys...at least the children do not worship the golden calf..." (Friedman 173). The main point of the story is that ironically agony is the one experience that unites everyone, yet Mrs. Cope, after all that happens, still doesn't recognize this point. Her daughter does though; as one critic states, "At this moment of crisis she herself is not able to see into this profundity, but her unnamed daughter, reacting like a true prophet, feels the metamorphosis even if she does not fully understand what is occurring" (Friedman 173). The narration of the story states, "The child came to a stop beside her mother and stared up at her face as if she had never seen it before. It was the face of the new misery she felt, but on her mother it looked old and it looked as if it might have belonged to anybody..." (O'Connor 193). The child recognizes the change in her mother and is one of the few characters in the story that does so.

Flannery O'Connor achieves greatness because of her ability to bring these three quite different elements--religion, the grotesque, and humor--together

into a single cohesive unit; the three are interdependent--the grotesque to emphasize the religious message of faith through mystery, the humor in the midst of the grotesque. As a Southern writer, O'Connor overcame the inhibiting pressure to fall into regionalism, and it is through these broad elements that O'Connor does so. Because she addresses, in Southern terms, issues that cover a more widespread spectrum than do regionalists, specifically moral issues to which anyone can relate, she is able to become the influential writer that she is today.



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