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Author(s): Bob Dowell

Source: *College English*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Dec., 1965), pp. 235-239

Published by: [National Council of Teachers of English](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/373114>

Accessed: 07/09/2011 20:04

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tion. Golding is too much a product of his times to provide the optimistic conclusion given by Fisher. Fisher portrays the despair of man in later novels in his *Testament of Man*, but Golding finds it at the very origin of the human being. The thin line between ape and man also separates a moral from an immoral world. Speaking at Kenyon College in 1947, Lionel Trilling said of the modern novel that "our present definition of a serious book is one which holds before us some image of society to consider and condemn."⁴ The anti-utopian novels of Aldous Huxley and George Orwell are examples of Trilling's thesis, but Golding traces the defects of society to their source—within the individual—in *Lord of the Flies* and to their origin—in the earliest clearly recognizable antecedent of man—in *The Inheritors*. Golding's

⁴Lionel Trilling, "Manners, Morals, and the Novel," *Discussions of the Novel*, ed., Roger Sale (Boston, 1960), p. 60.

popularity, especially on the campus, indicates that he has been sympathetically accompanied in his search for the origins of despair. Perhaps our own moral responsibility is lessened by a view which places the death of morality so far in our past. Or perhaps it is the inability of the individual to effect any significant change in existing conditions that causes the reader to identify with Lok when he is left alone and helpless.

Lok is, in fact, the last moral man in the world as created by William Golding. Even while the "new people" had been killing his people, Lok did not hate them. "He was frightened of the new people and sorry for them as for a woman who has the sickness" (*The Inheritors*, p. 175). Later when the "new people" are gone, Lok, viewed through the eyes of a water rat, stands crying in the mud. Although he does not understand his reasons, Lok—like Ralph in *Lord of the Flies*—is crying for the end of innocence.

The Moment of Grace in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor

BOB DOWELL

FLANNERY O'CONNOR REVEALED, on more than one occasion, her concern about the public's misconstruing of the meaning of her fiction. She was perturbed by certain critics placing her in the School of Southern Degeneracy, and she was insulted by others placing her in the Southern Gothic School. "Degeneracy," she said, "at least can be taken in a moral sense," for it suggests a standard to degenerate from; but "the Gothic is a degeneracy which is not recognized as such" (L).

Mr. Dowell, assistant professor of English at East Texas State University, is presently preparing a critical study of William Faulkner.

In a lecture entitled "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Literature,"¹ delivered at East Texas State University in the fall of 1962, Miss O'Connor seemed to answer misdirected criticism of her fiction by giving a general explanation of what she was attempting as a writer. Although in this lecture Miss O'Connor generally speaks collectively of Southern writers, she seems to be primarily explaining her own "poetics." Commenting on her grotesque characters, she concludes that the public views these protagonists as freaks and, "with its clinical

¹References to this lecture are indicated in the text as follows: (L).

bias invariably approaches them from the standpoint of abnormal psychology" (L). Such a view obviously annoys the author, for her own view of man is unmistakably theological, and in commenting on the milieu from which her characters are drawn she says that "in the South the general conception of man is still, in the main, theological" (L). The South is hardly Christ-centered, she explains, but "it is most certainly Christ-haunted" (L). Needless to say, psychological explanations for the compulsions of her characters will hardly suffice.

A perusal of Miss O'Connor's fiction will reveal that Christ-haunted figures furnish the author her principal subject matter. Through the conflicts, often violent ones, of these protagonists who oscillate between belief and unbelief, between self-will and submission, the author presents her view of reality. This grotesque drama that she presents takes place in a discernible theological framework in which there is an implicit acceptance of the concept of a created universe, "with all that implies of human limitations and human obligations to an all-powerful Creator" (L). Such a view heightens man's every action, for his every action is seen "under the aspect of eternity" (L). Thus, Miss O'Connor's fiction is primarily concerned with man's life-and-death spiritual struggle. The protagonist, rebelling against belief, forces a crisis that reveals to him his haughty and willful misconception of reality, at which time he experiences what Miss O'Connor has called his "moment of grace." Without exception this moment comes at great price.

The grandmother in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find"² experiences her moment of grace only seconds before the Misfit murders her by firing three bullets through her chest. "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" was my introduction to Flan-

nery O'Connor, and I must admit that after considerable reflection on the story, I was still somewhat puzzled by the whole thing and particularly by the grandmother's final remark to the Misfit. As if confessing, she says, "Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children" (p. 22). Upon being questioned about this passage, Miss O'Connor explained that this was the grandmother's "moment of grace."

Such an explanation makes sense only in a theological framework. The Misfit's meanness is the result of his inability to believe. If Christ does exist and can raise the dead, says the Misfit, "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 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. No pleasure but meanness" (p. 21). Because he cannot believe, the Misfit commits himself to evil. The grandmother recognizes him as one of her own children because she suddenly realizes that her superficial commitment to good has been meaningless because she lived without faith, that is to say without Christ. By rejecting Christ, man usurps that place for himself, thereby committing the final disobedience to his Creator. In the O'Connor world whether one commits himself to evil deeds or good deeds makes little difference ultimately, for without Christ one's actions only lead to evil.

"A Good Man Is Hard to Find" dramatizes this theological view. Although it is the Misfit who has the grandmother's family killed and then kills the grandmother himself, it is the grandmother who causes the wreck that places the family at the mercy of the Misfit. It is also the grandmother who identifies the Misfit, thus causing him to deem it necessary to do away with the family for his own safety.

²Title story in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (New York, 1961), pp. 6-22.

In a later story entitled "Revelation"³—which, I believe, is Miss O'Connor's last published story before her death—we confront a strong-willed personality in Mrs. Turpin. She and her husband Claude operate a multi-purpose farm that produces both crops and livestock and through good management furnishes the couple a comfortable living. The competent, self-assured Mrs. Turpin often boasts, "we got a little of everything" (p. 184).

Although the story offers superb dialogue which humorously reflects provincial attitudes and prejudices, the reader soon grasps the theological concern in this somewhat pointed story, whose action is divided between a doctor's waiting room and the Turpin's "pig parlor." In the conversation of the waiting room the loquacious Mrs. Turpin unwittingly reveals her one flaw: a feeling of self-sufficiency, or in theological terminology, pride. As the conversation progresses from the problems of farming and raising pigs to the Negro problem and the problem of raising children, Mrs. Turpin secretly compares herself to the "white trash," the Negro, and the ugly, ill-dispositioned college girl, who sits reading a book entitled *Human Development*. Exalted by the comparison she silently begins a pharisaical prayer; but her unrelenting pride swells, until, no longer able to restrain herself, she blurts it out: "If it's one thing I am . . . it's grateful. When I think who all I could have been besides myself and what all I got, a little of everything, and a good disposition besides, I just feel like shouting, 'Thank you, Jesus, for making everything the way it is!' It could have been different!" (p. 190). Having ended her prayer, Mrs. Turpin is not only violently attacked by the college girl but is taunted with a haunting accusation: "Go back to

hell where you came from, you old wart hog" (p. 192). Mrs. Turpin is astounded that such a message should be delivered her when the room was full of white trash to whom it might have been justly given.

At the pig parlor, Mrs. Turpin addresses the pigs, but in actuality is rebelliously questioning God for singling her out for such a degrading message—she who had always done her Christian duty. Her answer comes in the form of a vision in which she sees a bridge extending from earth through a field of living fire to heaven. Hordes of souls were rumbling over the bridge to heaven, but to her surprise, leading the procession were "companies of white trash, clean for the first time in their lives" (p. 201), Negroes in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics leaping along like frogs. "And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claude, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right" (p. 201). Although this group marches on key, and with dignity, responsible as always, "their virtues are being burned away" (p. 201). Burned away by the fire of truth, the reader assumes. Agonizing though the vision proves, Mrs. Turpin recognizes her overweening sin of pride, thus experiencing her moment of grace.

Although the details of Mrs. Turpin's religious experience seem somewhat ludicrous and the vision itself seems comic when compared to an ideal image that no doubt most readers would hold of a mystical experience, Miss O'Connor is unquestionably in earnest. I suspect the comic technique employed in most of her stories to be, for the most part, a necessary vehicle for carrying her unpopular theme. Humor is always an accessible mask for saying what one actually believes, for somehow humor proves an accepted convention for voicing what would otherwise be resented.

³Sewanee Review 72 (Summer 1964) pp. 178-202. "Revelation" has since been published posthumously in *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (New York, 1965), pp. 191-218.

Though willing to exploit his unwilling antics, Miss O'Connor never loses sight of man as a created being whose soul is precious to his Creator. Despite his ignorance, his rebelliousness, and his tendency toward evil, man still realizes his fullest potential by participating in a supernatural relation with his Creator. This depends upon his recognition of the existence of evil, of his own tendency toward evil, and his ability to triumph over evil through grace, a supernatural gift from God which comes only with man's full realization of his lost condition and his dependence on Christ. With this realization, which constitutes his moment of grace, man's salvation is begun; he can then begin to fulfill the purpose of his existence, which is to reflect the goodness of his Creator and to share the happiness of heaven with Him. This is Miss O'Connor's view of ultimate reality.

Perhaps the story that best dramatizes this view is the author's own favorite story, "The Artificial Nigger."⁴ By taking his grandson, Nelson, to the city to introduce him to evil, Mr. Head discovers his own "true depravity" that lies hidden in his heart (p. 99). The grandfather has taught the boy that the city is evil and that the Negro is an inferior being. Ironically, however, it is while the two confront the "artificial nigger," which they mistakenly believe to be a monument to the black race, that the severed relationship between Mr. Head and Nelson is healed. They are brought together in common defeat. And for Mr. Head certainly, the experience in the city proves to be his salvation.

Earlier, having denied kinship to his grandson in order to avoid legal responsibility for the boy's inadvertent injury to an elderly lady, the grandfather had not only lost his grandson's respect but

had estranged the boy. Terribly aware of his guilt, yet unable to be absolved because of Nelson's unforgiving nature, Mr. Head, wandering lost and alienated in the evil city, fully comprehends what life would be like without God's gift of grace to redeem mankind.

Grace plays a major role in Miss O'Connor's two novels as well as in her numerous short stories. Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood* (1952) and the young Tarwater in *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960) are exaggerated examples of Christ-haunted figures. Both Motes and Tarwater have been catechized by fanatic preacher kinsmen, Motes by his grandfather and Tarwater by his great-uncle; yet each rebels by attempting to convince himself that Christ does not exist. Motes makes his temporary denial by preaching his "church without Christ." Like Hulga in "Good Country People,"⁵ Motes seeks to believe in nothingness. Tarwater, guided by his humanistic uncle, denies that evil exists and, consequently, that man need not concern himself with redemption.

Significantly though, both protagonists feel compelled incessantly to prove their disbelief. The young Tarwater, reared by his fanatical great-uncle to be a prophet, struggles with ambivalent compulsions; repeatedly, the uncle has emphatically charged the boy to baptize his own idiot nephew at the first step in his prophetic role. In an effort to deny his uncle's commission and ultimately assert his disbelief, Tarwater drowns his nephew but while doing so cannot resist the compulsion to utter the words of the baptismal ritual.

Ironically in committing the crime to deny the existence of evil and man's need for redemption, the young Tarwater only makes evil a reality and heads himself "toward everything the old man had prepared him for" (p. 203). Evil appears to the boy personified in the

⁴In *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, pp. 79-99. During her visit to East Texas State University in November 1962, Miss O'Connor revealed "The Artificial Nigger" to be her own favorite of the stories she had written.

⁵In *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, pp. 79-99.

form of a sex pervert who dopes and sexually assaults him. As an act of purification the boy sets fire to the woods where the assault has taken place, and as Moses heard God's voice from the burning bush, so the boy hears God's command: "GO WARN THE CHILDREN OF GOD OF THE TERRIBLE SPEED OF MERCY" (p. 242). Young Tarwater has experienced his moment of grace and begins his destiny as prophet as he moves "steadily on, his face set toward the dark city where the children of God lay sleeping" (p. 243).

Like the young Tarwater, Motes's denial leads him to commit murder, but ultimately results in belief and redemption. Dressed in his dark serge suit and top hat, Motes drives his old rat-colored Essex from theater to theater; standing tall and dignified atop the hood of the car, he preaches his church without Christ to the departing theater goers. Recognizing the possibility of exploiting this phenomenon by reversing Motes's negativism, a con man sets up a rival, who is an exact image of Motes himself. Enraged by this hypocritical rival preaching the Christ in whom he obviously does not believe, Motes murders him. Significantly, however, Motes is killing his other self, the self that he unconsciously despises. The murder leads Motes to repentance and prolonged harsh penance. Like Oedipus, Motes blinds himself for not seeing when he had eyes to see. In his blindness he seeks reconciliation with God.

His skeptical landlady, Mrs. Flood, with her modern materialistic bent of mind, observes Motes as he dedicates himself entirely to spiritual cleansing accentuated through self-inflicted torture. Unable to comprehend his motives she questions him about what seem to her his inane actions. Learning that he keeps strands of barbed wire wrapped around his chest and broken glass in his shoes, Mrs. Flood soundly rebukes him:

"Well it's not normal. It's like them gory stories, it's something that people have quit doing—like boiling in oil or being a saint. . . . There's no reason for it!"

"They ain't quit doing it as long as I'm doing it," he said. (p. 224)

Though not understanding Motes's spiritual quest, Mrs. Flood is unwittingly drawn closer and closer to this strange blind man, even to the point that she is no longer interested in what money she can get from him. In fact, she begins to enjoy taking care of him and is willing to make sacrifices herself to do so. Perhaps she even experiences her moment of grace as she sits staring into the eyes of the dead Motes. She feels "blocked at the entrance of something" which only Motes can open for her, for "she saw him moving farther and farther away, farther and farther into darkness until he was the pin point of light" (p. 232).

Miss O'Connor sought to give new life to what she believed to be significant religious truths that were once a living reality but which the modern mind has tended to either distort or reject. Her stories, which are in a sense grotesque parables, dramatize the existence of evil. Satan's greatest triumph, her works seem to suggest, lies in the fact that he has convinced the world that he does not exist. But for Miss O'Connor he does exist. The backwoods fanatics who either believe he exists or at least are preoccupied with the possibility of his existence may seem ludicrously grotesque to most readers. Yet Miss O'Connor gives serious treatment to these grotesques because their concerns are her concerns. In their defense, she has publicly stated that "their fanaticism is a reproach, not simply an eccentricity. Those who, like Amos or Jeremiah, embrace a neglected truth will be seen to be the most grotesque of all" (L). The conflict between grace and evil in the lives of her characters reflects for the author the most significant drama in the realm of human experience.