ANALYSIS

"Revelation" (1964)

Flannery O'Connor

(1925-1964)

"Flannery O'Connor never yowled in public. She never said what her mute scowl expressed. But she rendered it in pictures as powerful as the tableau of the grandmother and the Misfit, bound in silence to each other through a ritual of politeness. The Misfit can find no words to speak his rage at his would-be-mother. Fury explodes from his gun in three eloquent shots. And one of the revelations in 'Revelation' is Mary Grace's peculiar wrath. As her mother and Mrs. Turpin criticize her, Mary Grace, a fat, pimply girl who never smiles (she got ugly up north at Wellesley), accepts her mother's remarks politely but grows enraged at Mrs. Turpin. She gets so angry she throws a book at her. But after she hurls it, her very fury makes her crumple to the floor. Her mother bends over her, a doctor sedates her while she clings irresistibly to her mother's hand.

O'Connor perfectly welds her need for her mother and her hatred of her, meshes them into one experience of the destruction, the humiliation of needing someone who refuses to accept you at all. And Mary Grace is too vulnerable, too crippled even to attack her own mother. She attacks her mother's 'double,' Mrs. Turpin, while leaving her own mother alone, much in the way the Misfit claims there was 'no finer' woman than his mother, but goes on the murder a woman who suggests to him all the forces of tradition and family and claims he is 'one of her babies."

Josephine Hendin
*Vulnerable People: A View of American Fiction since 1945*
(Oxford 1978) 154-55

"It is a tribute to O'Connor's 'reasonable use of the unreasonable' that, in 'Revelation,' she could make a bite on a fat woman's neck by a Wellesley student with acne the occasion for self-confrontation. After the attack and before she is drugged, the ugly girl whispers to Mrs. Turpin, 'Go back to hell where you come from, you old wart hog!' This farfetched accusation shapes the remaining story, as Mrs. Turpin strives to understand in what sense she can possibly be a pig. 'How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell too?' And, as she ponders these questions, gazing down into the pig parlor on her farm, 'as if through the very heart of mystery,' the answer comes to her. Her vision is as extraordinary as the events that have preceded it, and it is posed in terms that are equally stark and funny….

As infrequently happens in O'Connor stories, the content of Mrs. Turpin's revelation is fully externalized; it is made as available to the reader as to the fictional recipient. Unlike Mrs. May's encounter in 'Greenleaf,' or Mrs. Cope's experience at the end of 'A Circle in the Fire,' we do not have to construe the probable nature of the suffering insight. It is a decided step toward rendering of subjective consciousness; nonetheless, the nature of the vision, even when it is unmistakably exposed, has its own set of accompanying ambiguities. To understand why, consider the contest of this disturbing revelation.

It is the result of a shock to a respectable woman's self-image. O'Connor begins the story in a doctor's office, and the patients waiting for attention constitute a microcosm of southern society. The chance gathering, the situation of persons unknown to each other assembled in a room, could provide a forum for discussing the workings of fate (in the way that Thornton Wilder asks why five particular people were together on the bridge of San Luis Rey when it broke), but O'Connor arranges this cast to reflect the workings of Mrs. Turpin's mind.

In this room are all the possibilities of birth and position in the rural South: a well-dressed 'pleasant' lady; a thin, worn woman in a cheap cotton dress; another woman in a 'gritty-looking' yellow sweatshirt and slacks; a dirty sniveling child; a fat, ugly teenager; and eventually a black messenger boy. Her presence in this company occasions one of Mrs. Turpin's frequent reflections on the good fortune of her own position in life, and this extends into the question of who she would have chosen to be if she couldn't

have been herself. 'If Jesus had said to her before he made her, "There's only two places available to you. You can either be a nigger or white-trash," what would she have said?'

In the imaginative interior monologue that follows, Mrs. Turpin reveals both the source of her self-satisfaction and her criterion of evaluation: she considers herself a good woman, a hard worker, clean and charitable; she would rather be a black woman with these qualities than 'white-trash.' When confronted with the imaginative alternative of being born ugly, she is horrified. Although Mrs. Turpin does not articulate these thoughts, O'Connor counterpoints the woman's private musings with what is said, to tell the reader what is actually behind the public façade. For example, when Mrs. Turpin says she and Claud have a pig parlor and a hose to wash down the pigs, she thinks to herself that her animals are cleaner than the snot-nosed child. When a poorly dressed woman says she 'wouldn't scoot down no hog with no hose,' Mrs. Turpin thinks, 'You wouldn't have no hog to scoot down.'

This discrepancy between private opinion and public comment acts as an effective signal of hypocrisy and shows, without any explicit authorial comment, the distance between Mrs. Turpin's complacency and her faults. Where the woman sees herself as charitable, she is shown to be proud; where she considers herself thoughtful, she is condescending; her solicitousness hides contempt. In terms of both race and class, Mrs. Turpin's self-satisfaction is gained at the expense of others. Although she does not expose herself directly, she insinuates enough for the Wellesley student to surmise the truth, to assault her physically, and to accuse her of being a wart hog.

It is at this juncture that Mrs. Turpin tries to come to terms with the accusation. 'I am not,' she said tearfully, 'a wart hog. From hell.' That the denial has no force shows the protagonist to be moving toward a recognition of the distortion that the reader already has seen. The final vision of souls 'rumbling toward heaven' is posed in exactly the terms in which Mrs. Turpin has always seen life, as a matter of social hierarchy. But she envisions herself to be last in line; this time in procession behind the white-trash, Negroes, and lunatics, and it is this image that completes the message of ill-founded self-esteem.

If one wishes to identify grace as that which destroys illusions, then it can be said that Mrs. Turpin has experienced grace. But to say this is very different from making a statement about religion, for the epiphanies that occur in Joyce's fiction can be described in the same way. What is different is the tone and theatricality of O'Connor's moment of insight. In Joyce's work, a young boy looks up at the dim celing of a closing fair and says quietly, 'I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity.' In O'Connor's work, this same realization of vanity is heralded by ponderous machinery. 'She raised her hand from the side of the pen in a gesture hieratic and profound. A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw. The vision that is subsequently revealed is not couched in personal terms; Mrs. Turpin does not see herself as the boy in 'Araby' did. She only recognized 'those who like herself…had always had a little of everything.'

It should be noticed that the revelation is a dramatization of a hypothetical event—a parade to heaven; it is not the actual statement of understanding. Consequently, the abstract meaning of this imaginative parade, both to Mrs. Turpin and to the reader, is still left to be construed. That the march to heaven and the language theological is undeniable. But the vision occurs in the idiom that has characterized this woman's previous musings; the terms of formulation are consistent with the character of the churchgoing middle-class, and in this respect the whole imaginary scene can be considered a metaphor, the concrete terms of an abstraction that remains unstated in the text.

The meaning of the vision, then, is not forced into the mold of theology; for the language and images of theology are used as a means to an end that must answer the problems posed in the preceding events of the story. What Mrs. Turpin must see as she turns from the pigsty is her own participation in lowlife, her own complicity, along with blacks and poor whites, in human suffering and limitation. This is what had remained beyond her self-image in the doctor's waiting room; this is the knowledge that presumably can diminish her complacency. For the reader, the fact that the 'message' has been given to Ruby Turpin, 'a respectable, hard-working, churchgoing woman,' has its own implications. For it suggests that the most self-respecting people can also be the most dangerous."

Carol Shloss
"Epiphany"

*Flannery O'Connor's Dark Comedies: The Limits of Inference*
(Louisiana State U 1980)

"Confrontations with the literal—the literal itself, its literal origin, a literal meaning—are the repeated actions in Flannery O'Connor, and they take place…on borderlines between the city and the country or between day and night. This is why so often O'Connor's stories end at sunset, as in 'Revelation,' when Mrs. Turpin watches her hogs as the sun goes down…. From this sight she looks up as the sun goes down and sees her vision of a vast hoard of souls going to heaven, 'whole companies of white trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs'….The language is that of Mrs. Turpin, another in O'Connor's succession of good country people. The language informs a rural vision…with a sense of supernatural force so that the whole is seen in a new light. Here again O'Connor creates the *presence* of the supernatural, of mysterious forces beyond the daylight self, in pit and sunset.

'Revelation' begins with Mrs. Turpin's confrontation with a Wellesley student in a doctor's office, yet it ends with her own uncouthness—her own rural sensibility—miraculously transformed in the presence of a secret life. That life is Mrs. Turpin's life, but dark, unknown, strange: it is the life revealed in the college girl's fierce remark: 'Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog.' It is the inhuman life of wart hogs from hell that, literalized, leads strangely to Mrs. Turpin's vision of heaven. Mrs. Turpin 'faces' herself with the hog; she sees her own secret life in the elemental life of her farm and discovers…the presence of God in and beyond His creation, in and beyond the hogs, the people, the peculiar light of the setting sun. This is the light of grace, and it appears again at another sunset situated between the city and the country at the end of 'The Artificial Nigger'."

Ronald Schleifer
"Rural Gothic"
*Modern Fiction Studies* 28.3 (Autumn 1982)

"Mrs. Turpin's comically furious cry, 'How am I a hog and me both?' focuses her humbling discovery that her closest kin is not human at all, that her deepest nature denied in her fantasies of election and in her good works, is reflected in that old sow in her up-to-date pig parlor—and that however sanitized, a hog is a hog. But here as elsewhere in O'Connor the unveiling of true kinship is as self-estranging as it is self-revealing, for the climactic vision opens up to Mrs. Turpin a dimension in which even her virtues, which she had smugly taken for her deepest self, 'were being burned away.' Between the old sense of self and the new and dismaying knowledge, there opens a chasm hardly to be bridged. Inherent in the very use of the double motif is a dualistic conception of the self, of character so deeply divided that an essential part can be embodied in an independent figure" [such as a hog].

Frederick Asals
"The Double"
*Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity*
(U Georgia 1982)

"'Revelation' was the last story Flannery O'Connor wrote under the illusion that her life would continue on a fairly even keel…. In any event, in [her] last three stories she was to write in that final year there appear features that may be seen as summings-up of all she had been trying to do in her work. There is a metaphor for the vision behind her work as a whole; there is a telling image of herself as an artist and the effect she hoped her works would have on readers; and finally, a portrait of strength of character, and of faith, hope, and love, against all odds and in the face of death itself.

Most of 'Revelation' takes place in a doctor's office. Here an assortment of wonderfully drawn characters from every social stratum, defined most of all by what they say, await their turns. The central figure is a…monument of complacency and self-congratulation, who observes and categorizes the others according to a system of her own that reflects all too sharply the social stratification more widely accepted than most of us would like to think. Ruby Turpin, accompanying her husband who has been kicked in the shin by a cow, indirectly communicates her low opinion of everyone there except a 'stylish lady' waiting with her sick and very ugly daughter. The daughter, a churlish 'book-worm,' almost insistently named

Mary Grace, is pigeon-holed by Mrs. Turpin with the words, 'You must be in college, I see you reading a book there.'

The book the girl is reading is called *Human Development*, but it cannot distract her enough from the stream of obtusely self-satisfied commentary and self-praise she is being forced to listen to, and the state of mind it all implies. Driven finally into an uncontrollable rage, the girl breaks the outward calm of the scene by throwing her book straight at Mrs. Turpin's head and leaping for her throat. As she is being restrained and sedated, she delivers an order to the now speechless tormentor: 'Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog.'

Although Mrs. Turpin cannot imagine why such a message should be addressed to *her*, she knows that it is, recognizing the power of authenticity in it, and it continues to haunt her even when she and her husband have gone home to rest and recover from their shock. Later in the afternoon, she sets off to 'scoot down' with a hose her hogs in the 'pig parlor,' and there, like what O'Connor called a 'female Jacob shouting at the Lord over a hogpen,' she has it out with Him. The blessing she extracts is a vision that grandly sums up in an unforgettable metaphor, the whole point of O'Connor's fiction: the proper, sensible, and complacent members of society, their specious virtues being burned away, are shown bringing up the rear of the great horde of preposterous humanity making its way heavenward into the starry skies.

What image could better express what Flannery O'Connor has tried to show us in her stories, long and short? And what did she herself do but 'throw the book' at us all? There is nothing self-congratulatory in her portrait of Mary Grace, who is one of the ugliest creatures she ever invented. But even this fact reminds us that her stories were at times and by some as much dispraised for their 'ugliness' as they were praised for their power."

Sally Fitzgerald
Introduction
*Three by Flannery O'Connor*
(Penguin/Signet 1983) xxix-xxxi

"In a letter about Ruby Turpin, the main character in 'Revelation,' O'Connor wrote that 'You got to be a very big woman to shout at the Lord across a hogpen. She's a country female Jacob.' And a wonderfully comic creation, a devious self-willed, smug country woman, a favorite O'Connor target. She thinks of herself as particularly blessed by God, but it is exactly when she shouts out her gratitude for being so wonderful ('Oh thank you, Jesus, Jesus, thank you') that she is brought low. She is attacked by a young intellectual woman, another favorite target of the author's, who says, 'Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog.' Only after this humbling is there any hope for redemption for Ruby Turpin. In her final vision, she sees a 'vast horde of souls rumbling toward heaven.' First in line are the least in this world, 'white trash,' 'niggers,' and lunatics. And last are the respectable, smug, materialistic people like herself, 'even their virtues burned away.' This vision, O'Connor says, is purgatorial. Mrs. Turpin is now worthy of salvation.

This story, 'Parker's Back' and 'Judgment Day' were written in the last year of O'Connor's life, after her health had deteriorated radically. The three are the clearest and most moving statements of O'Connor's religious beliefs and feelings. But despite the seriousness of her themes and the power of her commitment, Flannery O'Connor is a comic writer. She can make a reader laugh out loud, at the outrageous imagery, at the twists of countrified speech, at characters who are exaggerated and grotesque but somehow not horrible, and even at the comic absurdity she sees in the spiritual condition of modern humanity."

Wilfred Stone, Nancy Huddleston Packer, Robert Hoopes
*The Short Story: An Introduction*
(McGraw-Hill 1983) 470

"The desire to differentiate oneself from those not belonging to one's own 'kind' or class is perhaps no more clearly evident in O'Connor's stories than in 'Revelation.' Just as Sally Poker Sash relies on the General and the social values his uniform represents and just as the General relies on the group identity of

the Confederate Army for a sense of significance, so Ruby Turpin in 'Revelation' derives a sense of self not only from her occupational group but also from her social class, her religious affiliation, and her race.

Ruby Turpin's primary mode of attack as she fortifies her sense of self while waiting in a crowded doctor's office is to categorize and to criticize the other patients there. She pretends to be egalitarian and open, declaring 'It's all kinds of *them* [Negroes] just like it's all kinds of *us*' (emphasis added), but she rigidly classifies people according to their dress, possessions, and speech. The various levels of Southern society are stereotypically represented in this story: poor black by the delivery boy, poor white by the 'trashy' woman, working middle class by the Turpins themselves, and upper class by the 'stylish' mother of the Wellesleyan student.

When the story opens, Mrs. Turpin, a woman of great size, 'sized up the seating situation'—thereby immediately exhibiting a hierarchical habit of mind. That she primarily measures the worth of people in the waiting room according to their clothing ought to remind us of the General and Sally Poker Sash. The emphasis is n Mrs. Turpin's superficial vision; she sees only surfaces. Her vision lacks depth because she is too quick to judge (she 'saw at once, 'She had seen from the first.' She notices in detail the clothing of each person she scrutinizes, and their shoes. She concludes for example that what the 'white-trashy woman' was wearing, 'bedroom slippers, black straw with gold braid threaded through them,' was 'exactly what you would have expected her to have on.' Ruby in fact relies on what she expects to see given the stereotypes of her materialistic culture.

As mentioned earlier, the tendency to rely on cliché, like the tendency to establish rigid class lines, is symptomatic of a conforming mind. Even the titles of O'Connor's stories ('A Good Man Is Hard to Find,' for example) point to the special importance of cliché, and she sometimes provides small touches of them, as in this story, or sometimes uses them heavy-handedly, as in 'Good Country People.' Mrs. Turpin and the 'pleasant lady' parrot our culture's often superficially realized ideals of tolerance and love for others—expressed in the bromide Mrs. Turpin reiterates most often: 'It takes all kinds to make the world go round.' Moreover, Ruby rationalizes using the cliché, 'fat people have good dispositions.' She is not receptive to the inner reality of others but rather sees only the outward trappings—social masks.

Mrs. Turpin establishes herself in a select group differentiated from most others to avoid being herself designated as 'common,' but when she contemplates how society ought to be stratified, she finds she cannot maintain a consistent system: 'On the bottom of the heap were most colored people…' Like Old Dudley's need to separate the races ('black and white and yellow') so that humanity is not 'all mixed up like vegetable soup,' Mrs. Turpin needs to maintain rigid racial lines. She objects 'because they [Negroes] got to be right up there with the white folks.' Her fear of 'people…moiling and roiling around in her head' also relates to what threatens Mrs. Shortley when she contemplates 'The Displaced Person' and his 'kind' of people, depicted in newsreels 'piled high…all in a heap, their arms and legs tangled together.' The preordained roles of the social hierarchy enable Mrs. Turpin to escape an unpleasant sense of fragmentation and insignificance.

Ruby Turpin claims to be a 'respectable, hard-working, church-going woman' who would 'help anybody out that needed it…whether they were white or black, trash or decent,' but her tendency to categorize people as 'white or black' undermines her assertions of being charitable and egalitarian. This all-knowing woman of 'experience,' grateful to be herself, 'a good woman,' easily accepts white rationalizations about blacks and the lower classes, such as the notion that it is proper to deprive them of the world's goods 'Because if you gave them everything, it two weeks it would all be broken or filthy.' A rich store of stereotypical attitudes is provided through numerous examples of dramatized conformity. The white-trashy woman, although more honestly expressing her racism than the others, also accepts unthinkingly her culture's givens—for example the idea that Negroes all want to marry whites to 'improve their color.' Although adversaries throughout, Mrs. Turpin and the trashy woman seem more alike as the story progresses. We see their resemblance when Mary Grace throws her book at Mrs. Turpin. The trashy woman then exclaims, 'I thank Gawd…I ain't a lunatic,' thus repeating Mrs. Turpin's self-congratulatory stance of gratitude for being herself.

Mary Grace calls Mrs. Turpin a wart hog from hell, and an ugly reality finally breaks through the light-hearted surface of this story—a surface created by dialogue that stresses the conflict between the inner and outer realities of human personality. The story line vacillates between exterior dialogue (what Mrs. Turpin says to express her 'goo woman' projections) and interior monologue, revealing what Mrs. Turpin thinks—nasty belittling thoughts about others. Politeness is countered by meanness. Mrs. Turpin's vision is finally blocked by her inability to be self-aware. Mary Grace looks 'directly through Mrs. Turpin,' but ironically Mrs. Turpin thinks that the girl is looking at something 'inside' that Mrs. Turpin needs to see—her own egoistic pride reinforced by mindless conformity to mass values.

When the 'stylish' lady uses her sense of class allegiance with Mrs. Turpin to form ranks and to attack her own daughter for not being grateful that her parents 'would give her anything,' and when Mary Grace responds by throwing her book at Mrs. Turpin, leaving the self-satisfied woman with a feeling of being 'hollow,' O'Connor communicates exactly the empty inner reality of Mrs. Turpin suggested throughout the story. Mrs. Turpin is finally 'a great empty drum of flesh' because she has not developed herself by relating constructively to others; she dimly perceives that the girl's attack is justified—'that the girl did know her…in some intense and personal way, beyond time and place and condition'—beyond class.

This glimmer of recognition indicates that in spite of her faults, Ruby Turpin gains in self-knowledge and faces the facts of her own physicality. She achieves 'a gesture hieratic and profound' when she goes home to contemplate her neat, clean, and decent pig parlor with the knowledge that keeping it clean will not whitewash the self or purify the flesh. Her apocalyptic vision involves the recognition that measures of virtue based on social status are worthless—and that the last shall be the first and the first last, the basic message of the book of 'Revelation,' which closes the Holy Scriptures. At the end of O'Connor's story, Ruby imagines 'a vast horde of souls…rumbling toward heaven,' places herself at the end of that 'procession,' and accepts the fact that we are all are 'just common'—thus relinquishing the notion of being 'singled out' or of achieving anything 'single-handed.' This recognition allows her to join 'the immense sweep of creation,' as O'Connor puts it, and to participate in 'the evolutionary process'."

Suzanne Morrow Paulson
*Flannery O'Connor: A Study of the Short Fiction*
(Twayne 1988) 59-63

Michael Hollister (2014)