

## INTRODUCTION



Flannery O'Connor

(1925-1964)

Flannery O'Connor is the major religious allegorist after Hawthorne and the descendant of Mark Twain as a richly ironic humorist. As one critic says, "She should be counted among the greatest comic writers of all time." Measured by the number of masterpieces written, she is also one of the 5 greatest American short story writers, with Hawthorne, Hemingway, Faulkner, and Porter—though her adult life was less than half as long as theirs. Her first novel *Wise Blood* (1952), filmed by John Huston, has a complexity comparable to James Joyce and is one of the best American short novels. She carries on the Christian tradition of T. S. Eliot in resisting Atheist Postmodernism. O'Connor was the first fiction writer born in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to have her works collected and published by the Library of America.

At age 25 she was diagnosed with lupus and expected to live only 3 more years, but she survived for 14, continuing bravely to write her stories. Her death at the age of only 39 was a premature loss to American literature comparable in magnitude to the early death of Stephen Crane. "Revelation" is one of her funniest and "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is the most famous of her stories. Other masterpieces include her favorite "The Artificial Nigger," "Everything That Rises Must Converge," "The Displaced Person," "Good Country People," "The Lame Shall Enter First," "Greenleaf," "The River," and "A Late Encounter with the Enemy." Some critics consider her second novel *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960) even better than *Wise Blood*. Many of her characters are much like those in *Huckleberry Finn* and the humorous fiction of Faulkner—individualized social types for the most part crude, prejudiced, materialistic, selfish, dishonest, and foolish specimens of what Twain called "the damned human race." Her great appeal derives in particular from her powerful dramatic plots, always ironic and often shocking, her realistic characters, and her unique blend of the horrifying and the hilarious.

## PRAISE

"She has certainly an uncanny talent of a high order." (T. S. Eliot) "That's good stuff." (William Faulkner) "The reviews of every one of her books have been overwhelmingly favorable." (Melvin J. Friedman) "[Her] best are among the best American short stories ever written." (*Time*) "According to critics, Flannery writes better than nearly anybody else now living." (Margaret Turner) "Not only have half a dozen stories entered anthologies; the very titles have entered the language." (Frederick Karl) "There are

no unavoidable pressures to consider these stories in a strictly religious sense. They stand securely on their own, as renderings and criticisms of human experience.” (Irving Howe) “The theological basis of O’Connor’s fiction adds a dimension and subtracts nothing”; “Only reality could sustain such intense art.” (Kathleen Feeley). A Catholic who called herself a “Christian realist”—O’Connor transcends theology through humor, characterizations, insights into human nature, and satire of most so-called religious people as fakes, hypocrites, grotesques, and “wart-hogs from hell.” Her grotesques have often been compared to those of Nathanael West, an Atheist, whereas she is Modernist in affirming the possibility of transcendence in this life, for those with faith in God.

“When I read Flannery, I don’t think of Hemingway, or Katherine Anne Porter, or Sartre, but rather someone like Sophocles.” (Thomas Merton) “In her stories every incident is seen in the light of eternity, one of the marks of a creative imagination of the first rank”; “She has a firmer grasp of the architectonics of fiction than any of her contemporaries.” (Caroline Gordon) “The writing is so damned good compared to almost anything else one reads: economical, clear, horrifying, *real*.” (Elizabeth Bishop) “The best of [her] tropes are superbly witty...with brilliant use of the comic simile...[and] stunning grasp of the possibilities of paradox.” (Frederick Asals) “Before you know it, the naturalistic situation has become metaphysical.” (Brainard Cheney) In her two novels “the protagonist is *actively* engaged with God. He may resist his vocation, defy it even...The turning point in his struggle will involve an act (murder, in each case) that defines him in relation to another character or characters. And that act is followed, in each work, by what we may call a moment of grace, of heightened consciousness, in which the meaning of the act compels from the hero a new recognition of his identity—a moment, then, which is at once a conversion to Christ and an inversion of his former selfhood.” (Miles Orvell)

## BIOGRAPHY

Mary Flannery O’Connor was born in Savannah, Georgia, an only child. In the Catholic calendar, the date of her birth marked the day the angel Gabriel announced to the Virgin Mary that she would become the mother of Jesus. Flannery’s father was a real estate agent who died of incurable lupus at age 40 when she was 15, the disease that would kill her too at age 39--a fate that contributed to her mordant sense of humor: “I don’t deserve any credit for turning the other cheek as my tongue is always in it.” Lupus is a deadly blood disease that can affect bone and muscle as the body’s immune system attacks its own vital tissues. Her father survived only 3 years after his first attack.

O’Connor’s combination crib and playpen was marketed as a “Kiddie-Koop Crib”—a chicken coop for kids. She described herself as a “pigeon-toed child with a receding chin and a you-leave-me-alone-or-I’ll-bite-you complex.” Even as a child her independent spirit was expressed in calling her parents by their first names, Ed and Regina. She lived with her mother Regina most of her life and they were very close, but they did not agree about social issues. Flannery dreamed of turning the henhouse into her private office with its own refrigerator. Many of the women in O’Connor’s fiction have characteristics of her mother. A close friend said “Miss Regina never understood Flannery, but she was always willing to defend her and look after her. She was a typical Southern lady. Flannery was something of a problem to her family, but they did recognize that she had tremendous talent and were proud of her.”

O’Connor first attained fame at the age of 6 when Pathe News filmed her with her pet chicken trained to walk backwards and showed it as a short in theaters around the country: “It was the high point of my life. Everything since has been an anti-climax.” She joined the Girl Scouts but she did not like to hike. When she attended meetings she brought along her chicken Aloysius dressed in little gray shorts, a little white shirt, a jacket and a red bowtie. “He just walked around us as we had our troop meeting,” recalls one of her fellow Girl Scouts.

## GEORGIA

O’Connor lived in Savannah until age 12 when her father was diagnosed and had to retire, then the family moved to a colonial house in rural Milledgeville, Georgia, where her mother had grown up. Her Irish emigrant great-grandmother had settled in Georgia in 1824 and her Irish-born great-grandfather had moved to Milledgeville in 1833. The house, built by slaves, had once been the Governor’s mansion when Milledgeville was the capitol of Georgia. “The chief event of the spring when I was growing up was the

annual garden club pilgrimage of homes....My attitude toward these occasions was pride, the outward face of which was boredom and mockery. I signed my name and the name of my chicken, Colonel Egbert, in the guest book and listed our address as Hungry and doubtless died laughing at myself." She defied society: "The only embossed [shirt] I ever had had a fierce-looking bulldog on it with the word GEORGIA over him. I wore it all the time, it being my policy in life to create an unfavorable impression." Around home she liked to wear jeans, plaid shirts and loafers. Among other writers up North she wore a beret. Her relatives thought "the height of Bohemianism is wearing slacks out of the house."

## EDUCATION

In Savannah she entered the first grade at a Cathedral and was educated for 6 years by conservative nuns, already drawing and writing verses. "From 8 to 12 years it was my habit to seclude myself in a locked room every so often and with a fierce (and evil) face, whirl around in a circle with my first knotted, socking the angel. This was the guardian angel with which the Sisters assured us we were all equipped.... I'm sure I even kicked at him and landed on the floor."

Then she attended the progressive Peabody High School, an experimental school run by the Education Department of Georgia State College for Women, just a block from her home in Milledgeville. "Ours is the first age in history which has asked the child what he would tolerate learning." She liked to stretch rubber bands and let them fly across her classrooms. She also played the accordion, clarinet, and bull fiddle, because, she said, "I am the only one who can hold it up." In a home economics course she was given the assignment of making a garment for a small child relative. When the class exhibited their achievements Flannery arrived leading a bantam hen wearing a white pique coat with a stylish belted back. For a life drawing class in Art, she brought her pet goose Herman to serve as her portrait model.

She developed an interest in Poe, especially his humorous stories and his horrific Gothic allegory *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. She called *Alice in Wonderland* "awful" but she loved Alcott's *Little Men*. She drew cartoons and wrote poems, stories and book reviews for the high school newspaper. "Literary expression was here encouraged in all matters except reflections on progressive education and critical teaching. It was a source of some small discomfort to these teachers that I could add only with the use of my fingers, confused history with a foreign language, and put 90% of my originality into my spelling. They overlooked such matters, however, on the assumption that if I ever became a writer, I could cease using my brains altogether." A fellow student recalls that young O'Connor's "stories were written with panache, and a wry sense of humor. But they were just weird."

## CARTOONING

She loved to draw, especially birds. By age sixteen O'Connor had written and illustrated three books, mostly about geese, "too old for young children and too young for older people." She graduated from the Georgia State College for Women in only 3 years in 1945, at the end of World War II. She served as editor of her college literary magazine, feature editor of the yearbook, and art editor of the newspaper. She published 120 satirical cartoons in the newspaper and did a cartoon mural for the student union building. A classmate said, "All of the teachers adored her and were constantly around her." One of her English teachers recalls, "Even then it was obvious she was a genius."

At first O'Connor planned to become a cartoonist and for awhile she submitted cartoons unsuccessfully to *The New Yorker*. Cartooning is Expressionism. Her cartoons exaggerate features of a character to suggest an essential identity, prefiguring her method of more complex characterization later in her fiction, after she gave up cartooning. She tried to render spiritual character, not merely physical features. She also wrote cartoonlike depictions of relatives and writers, such as "The Domestic Bliss of Samuel Taylor Coleridge," developing her sense of irony. Though she majored in Social Science, she would later satirize social scientists in general for reductive cartoonlike thinking, as if they provoked her "I'll-bite-you complex." Like most serious fiction writers, she educated herself: "Total non-retention has kept my education from being a burden to me."

## IOWA WRITERS WORKSHOP

In 1946 she went on a journalism scholarship to the University of Iowa, where her courses included drawing and American political cartooning. She had already discovered Joyce and Faulkner and at Iowa she read Kafka and other modern writers for the first time. Her favorites, as she evolved beyond Poe, were Hawthorne and Conrad. She was accepted into the Iowa Writers Workshop, then the most prestigious creative writing program in the country.

O'Connor became the star of the Workshop from 1947-48. Her stories were chosen to be read aloud and were praised by John Crowe Ransom, Editor of *Kenyon Review*, and by novelists Robert Penn Warren and Andrew Lytle, Editor of *Sewanee Review*. Yet she is reported to have remained silent during the lively discussions of her classmates' stories and did not even defend her own when they were criticized. Lytle on one occasion asked her directly what she thought of someone's story. "I'd say the description of the crocodile in there was real good," she replied, without adding that it was the *only* good thing and irrelevant to the rest of the story.

Lytle observed, "She was a lovely girl, but scared the boys to death with her irony." The men in the Workshop, many of them recent veterans of World War II, ganged up on her on the grounds that her stories were not realistic enough—too "mythic." One of her women classmates described her as "very serious about her mission in life...She knew she was a great writer. She told me so many times. If I would have heard that from other people, I would have laughed up my sleeve, but not with her." Normally O'Connor was quietly confident, though inexperienced. Lytle said, "She would put a man in bed with a woman, and I would say, 'Now, Flannery, it's not done quite that way.'"

O'Connor's first published story, "The Geranium," *Accent* (1946), was influenced by "Old Red," a story by Caroline Gordon, her later mentor. Her collection of stories for her master's thesis gave evidence that by age 21 O'Connor was already a master of the short story. Workshop director Paul Engle was the first to read *Wise Blood* and he awarded her a grant for a year to work on it. The style of her first collection might be described as conventional straightforward Realism, constrained by prevailing influences and hazards in an academic program. Free to be completely herself, O'Connor revealed herself to be a poetic Modernist—*Wise Blood* is consistently symbolic throughout, intricately patterned, thematically complex, richly allusive, archetypal, paradoxical, allegorical, ironic, Expressionistic, transcendental, and Christian. *Wise Blood* is the best work of fiction ever to come out of a creative writing program. "Everywhere I go, I'm asked if I think the universities stifle writers. My opinion is that they don't stifle enough of them." Flannery O'Connor earned an M.F.A. in 1947 and emerged from the Iowa Workshop as the most precocious American fiction writer since Stephen Crane.

## PUBLISHERS

The editor-in-chief of Rinehart publishing company, John Selby, responded to the first four chapters of *Wise Blood* by giving O'Connor the Rinehart-Iowa Fiction Award competition for a first novel. The first chapter was published in 1948 in the *Sewanee Review* and the *Partisan Review* published two stories taken from the novel in 1949. However, Selby's criticism of the completed manuscript provoked O'Connor to write her agent that he seemed to be addressing "a slightly dim-witted Camp Fire Girl." She responded to Selby that she would accept criticism "only within the sphere of what I am trying to do." Rinehart refused an advance for her novel unless she rewrote it as Selby directed. O'Connor declined. Selby was offended by her integrity and his release note described her as "stiff-necked, uncooperative, and unethical."

Her close friend the poet Robert Lowell introduced her to editor Robert Giroux at Harcourt, Brace and Company, who accepted the novel. The prominent critic Alfred Kazin wrote Giroux, "No fiction writer after the war seemed to me so *deep*, so severely perfect as Flannery. She would be our classic: I had known that from the day I discovered her stories." Later, *Wise Blood* was translated into French by the translator of Faulkner. She refused to allow sale of her work to Polish and Czech publishers because they might have used it for propaganda against the United States.

## YADDO

A potential relationship had ended for O'Connor when John Sullivan entered a seminary to study for the priesthood. She later remarked in a letter that she had given herself permission to fall in love several times. She continued working on her novella at the Yaddo artists' colony in upstate New York, near Sarasota Springs, where she became friends with a number of writers and critics. "In such a place you have to expect them all to sleep around. This is not sin but Experience, and if you do not sleep with the opposite sex, it is assumed that you sleep with your own"; "The help was morally superior to the guests."

She got involved in political controversy when the press reported that a Yadoo resident for 5 years, the radical journalist Agnes Smedley, was a Communist spy—a Soviet intelligence agent. The colony had been under FBI investigation for years. O'Connor joined a group led by Robert Lowell that met with the Yaddo board of directors and demanded that the leader of the colony, Elizabeth Ames, be dismissed for endangering the colony by supporting a Communist spy and her political agenda. Over 50 writers publicly defended the Communist spy and attacked Lowell and his group. Lowell, O'Connor and Hardwick left the colony and moved to New York. The Yadoo board sided with the Communist spy and retained Ames as leader of the colony. Lowell suffered a mental collapse. O'Connor wrote, "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."

## SLOW DEATH

In 1949 she lived in an apartment in New York City and then in Connecticut where she boarded for awhile with close friends, Robert and Sally Fitzgerald, babysitting one of their children. She worked on *Wise Blood* and attended Mass every day. Then she began to feel a heaviness in her limbs, until she could no longer lift her arms to type. On her way home from Connecticut for Christmas in 1950, she suffered an attack of lupus that almost killed her. She was hospitalized for 9 months, receiving blood transfusions and massive injections of hormones. Cortisone kept her alive, but her alarming fevers kept rising. The news that she had lupus and soon would die was kept from her for a year. She was only 25.

She and her mother retreated to the family dairy farm at Milledgeville, 500 acres of fields and 1,000 acres of woods, a rural setting like those in many of her stories, with black and white hired hands including displaced refugees from Poland--the basis in life for her great story "The Displaced Person." Whereas her father had survived only 3 years after his diagnosis, Flannery managed to live for 14 years, too weak to climb stairs. She had joint pain in her shoulders, arms and hips. The disease could impair her joints, blood vessels, lungs, kidneys, heart, or brain. As she explained, "cortisone makes you think night and day until I suppose the mind dies of exhaustion if you are not rescued." Large doses "send you off in a rocket." The drugs she took for the lupus weakened her bones, causing her hipbones to melt. Her face swelled up and all her hair fell out. She hobbled about with a cane, and then, for her last 9 years, on crutches. "I give the appearance of merely being a little drunk all the time."

"During this time I was more or less living my life and H. Mote's too and as my disease affected the joints, I conceived the notion that I would eventually become paralyzed and was going blind and that in the book I had spelled out my own course." Two chapters of *Wise Blood* were published in *New World Writing* in 1952 and the novel appeared that year to mixed reviews. Some Milledgeville residents were outraged. "When you publish a novel, the racket is like a fox in the hen house." One reviewer called her "insane." Her publisher Robert Giroux said, "I was shocked at the stupidity...the lack of perception, or even the lack of having an open mind....They all recognized her power but missed her point."

O'Connor turned to painting. She continued painting throughout her short life, depicting scenes of farm activity. She used a \$2,000 fellowship grant from John Crowe Ransom at *Kenyon Review* to pay for blood transfusions, medicine and books. Conscious that she was dying, she painted an Expressionist self-portrait with a gamecock, expressing how she felt rather than how she actually looked, comparing her mood to the fierce looking gamecock. The style is concrete Expressionism like her method of characterization in fiction, an advance from cartooning.

## CAREER TAKES OFF

Her mood may have been somewhat improved in 1953 by publication of “A Late Encounter with the Enemy,” one of her funniest stories, in *Harper’s Bazaar*; “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” in the anthology *Modern Writing I*; “A Stroke of Good Fortune” in *Shenandoah*; “The River” in *Sewanee Review*; and second prize in the annual O. Henry Awards for “The Life You Save May Be Your Own” in *Kenyon Review*. In 1954 “The Displaced Person” was published in *Sewanee Review* and three of her stories were nominated for the O. Henrys. “A Circle in the Fire” in *Kenyon Review* won second prize. Meanwhile she fell in love with a traveling textbook sales rep, a religious skeptic who kissed her once then left the country, a model for the devious traveling salesman Manley Pointer in her ironic story “Good Country People,” which she wrote after his unexpected departure “in about four days.”

In 1955 she was interviewed on television by a reporter from the *New York Times* and watched a scene adapted from her “The Life You Save May Be Your Own.” She was dismayed by its lack of faithfulness to her story. While spending a weekend with Caroline Gordon and other friends in Connecticut, she was visited by two of the most influential American literary critics, Van Wyck Brooks and Malcolm Cowley. That year the first chapter of her novel-in-progress, *The Violent Bear It Away*, was published in *New World Writing*. Most significantly, her first collection *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* received critical praise and also sold well. O’Connor said of the reactions by her neighbors and family, “Everybody here shakes my hand but nobody reads my stories. Which is just as well.”

## PEACOCKS

Soon after receiving her death sentence in 1952, O’Connor bought a pair of peacocks who multiplied ultimately to about 40. Thereafter she raised peacocks, swans, ducks, chickens, turkeys, pheasants, quail, geese, toucans, ostrich, emus, and other exotic birds. Peacocks are traditional symbols of Christ and appear as such in her fiction, most notably in “The Displaced Person.” In her poem “The Peacock Roosts (1953)” the peacock is identified with the sun as a symbol of divinity, the forest, and the “ancient design” of Nature. At first she tried to write in her study for about four hours every morning, though sometimes she could not write a word: “I go in every day, because if any idea comes between eight and noon, I’m there all set for it.” As her illness worsened, her work time diminished to two hours a day. “I pick up peafowl feathers as the dear birds shed. In the cool of the evening I am to be seen out in the pasture, bending painfully from my two aluminum sticks, reaching for some bright feather.” She gave them to her many visitors. “This place sounds like the jungle at night as they yell and scream at the slightest atmospheric disturbance or mechanical noise.”

## ISOLATION

There was no telephone on the farm until 1956 and O’Connor did not learn to drive a car until 1958. “I flunked the driving test the first time, barely bringing the patrolman back alive.” Given a television set in 1961, she unexpectedly enjoyed it—in particular the comic W. C. Fields. She was isolated as a Catholic in the Protestant “Bible Belt,” a religious writer in an Atheist culture, a Modernist among Postmodernists, a dying sick person among the healthy, and a genius among the uneducated. Incongruities contributed to her sense of irony. In her fiction irony is generated by contradictions (1) between what characters think of themselves and the truth about them, (2) between what nonbelievers believe and the truth, and (3) between what characters expect and what happens. Sentence by sentence O’Connor, Porter and Stephen Crane are the most consistently ironic American fiction writers.

She maintained her close relationship with her mother and for 10 years wrote a letter every week to her best friend Betty Hester, a recluse who committed suicide in 1998. For three years, 1957 to 1960, she met weekly with a group of local readers to discuss literature and theology. O’Connor responded to both positive and negative letters from readers and corresponded with many acquaintances and friends including Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, James Dickey, and Katherine Anne Porter, who visited her. Despite her pain and crutches and frail health, she got about, lecturing to diverse groups and at many universities. Her lecture at the University of Notre Dame in 1957 attracted 300. She conducted two writing workshops at the University of Chicago and somehow managed to travel for 17 days as far as Rome. Then she made another trip to Italy and Paris. At Lourdes she was moved by the supplicants at the shrine but disgusted by the

souvenir shops, comparing the village to “a beautiful child with smallpox”--“I prayed for my books, not my bones.”

#### READINGS

Her readings in her rural Georgia drawl were always popular. As a classmate in the Iowa Workshop described one occasion, “She took on all the characters. She would read in this kind of very heavy singsong but not really singing. It was a performance. It became totally hypnotic. So that all of us sitting there, young people in their teens and twenties, were totally struck.” A member of the audience at a later reading said “by the time that the grandmother found herself alone with *The Misfit* we were stunned into silence. It was a masterful performance.”

#### INTELLECT

In 1956 her powerful story “Greenleaf” won first prize in the O. Henrys. This story in particular displays her blending of mythological and biblical allusions in the tradition of T. S. Eliot. Her lady protagonist “faces the bull” in ways more complex than the characters in Hemingway. From 1956 until her death in 1964 O’Connor wrote 120 book reviews, mostly for two Catholic newspapers in Georgia. Her reviews and letters, like her fiction and her library, exhibit a rigorous intellect. Her habitual reading before going to sleep every night was the theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas. Great fiction differs from ordinary fiction in having significant intellectual content. O’Connor excelled repeatedly at the most intellectually difficult form of fiction—a realistic allegory of symbols.

Her satires of “intellectuals” are directed at pretentious rationalists, ideologues with closed minds who claim to be intellectuals—Sheppard in “The Lame Shall Enter First,” Hulga in “Good Country People,” Asbury in “The Enduring Chill,” and Rayber the atheist liberal schoolteacher in *The Violent Bear It Away*. O’Connor is one of the most intellectual American writers. Her publisher Giroux declared that “She was completely intellectual.” She turned down screenwriting job offers and she intensely disliked the unfaithful 1957 television version of her “The Life You Save May Be Your Own” on CBS. The misrepresentation was much praised in Milledgeville. “They feel that I have arrived at last.” The sentimental plot turned the villain into a good guy played by the popular entertainer Gene Kelly.

#### VISION

“Our life is and will remain essentially mysterious”; “For me the visible universe is a reflection of the invisible universe”; “It is what is invisible that God sees and that the Christian must look for”; “I have got, over the years, a sense of the immense sweep of creation, of the evolutionary process in everything, of how incomprehensible God must necessarily be”; “God is pure Spirit but our salvation was accomplished when the Spirit was made flesh [in Christ]”; “Discovering the Church is apt to be a slow procedure but it can take place if you have a free mind and no vested interest in disbelief”; “The Catholic sacramental view of life is one that sustains and supports at every turn the [anagogical: allegorical interpretation of life in relation to the afterlife and the concrete in relation to the spiritual] vision that the storyteller must have if he is going to write fiction of any depth”; “The kind of vision the reader needs to have, or to develop, in order to increase the meaning of his story is called anagogical vision, and that is the kind of vision that is able to see different levels of reality in one image or situation”; “The artist penetrates the concrete world in order to find at its depths the image of its source, the image of ultimate reality.”

“In the novelist’s case, prophecy is a matter of seeing near things with their extensions of meaning and thus of seeing far things close up. The prophet is a realist of distances, and it is this kind of realism that you find in the best modern instances of the grotesque.” “I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and that what I see in the world I see in relation to that”; “If there were no hell, we would be like the animals”; “Our salvation is a drama played out with the devil, a devil who is not simply generalized evil, but an evil intelligence determined on its own supremacy”; “More than in the Devil I am interested in the indication of Grace, the moment when you know that Grace has been offered and accepted”; “These moments are prepared for (by me anyway) by the intensity of the evil circumstances”; “The direction of many of us will be toward concentration and the distortion that is necessary to get our vision across; it will be more toward poetry than toward the traditional novel.”

## NOVELS

Both of O'Connor's novels dramatize the inner lives of alienated young males who become prophets. "The Christian novelist lives in a larger universe. He believes that the natural world includes the supernatural"; "What he sees at all times is fallen man perverted by false philosophies." Both her novels focus on the most important issue in life—belief or disbelief in God. Both protagonists are wrong throughout most of their stories, generating sustained ironies as in *Huckleberry Finn* (1884). Both novels are powerful, intensely concentrated, poetic, allegorical, and Modernist. Both *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear It Away* stand beside Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, *Absalom! Absalom!*, and *As I Lay Dying* as the greatest works of Expressionism in American fiction.

### *Wise Blood* (1952)

O'Connor satirizes Atheists by making their mouthpiece a backwoods fanatic who blinds himself. Yet in the end Haze is a saint. She felt "more kinship with backwoods prophets and shouting fundamentalists than...with those politer elements for whom the supernatural is an embarrassment and for whom religion has become a department of sociology or culture or personality development." *Wise Blood* is set literally in Tennessee and figuratively in the spiritual "Waste Land" of T. S. Eliot. Hazel Motes is a young veteran who loses his religious faith in World War I, comes home wounded and bitter and becomes an evangelist preaching his Atheism. Through the other main character, comical Enoch Emery the guard in the zoo who tries to become a star gorilla, she satirizes the pantheism popular since Thoreau. The satirical highlight in the novella is the shrunken mummy that becomes the "new Jesus" of Atheism.

## MAJOR SHORT STORIES

Most of O'Connor's stories are too complex to paraphrase. Her vision is epitomized in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," her most famous story. A family on an outing is murdered by an escaped convict who blows away their complacency and liberal illusions. Only the old grandmother transcends the horror by her faith and the grace of God. Nature is essentially good but the fallen human world is Gothic and dominated by evil, full of Misfits, grotesques and atrocities. Her publisher Giroux recorded his first reading of the story: "This is one of the greatest short stories ever written in the United States. It's equal to Hemingway, or Melville's 'Bartleby the Scrivener'."

Another of her greatest stories, "The Displaced Person," inspired by refugees from the Holocaust during World War II, explores varieties of displacement with a shocking conclusion. The two black characters were modeled on two black workers on the O'Connor farm. The surprise endings of O'Connor's stories are more complex in psychology, vision and aesthetics than those by Poe—as in "Good Country People," said by Allen Tate to be "without exception the most terrible and powerful story of Maimed Souls I have ever read." O'Connor's classic "A Late Encounter with the Enemy" embodies popular falsifications of history in "General Sash," a senile veteran 104 years old who thinks he is still handsome though he is nearly a corpse, displayed in a wheelchair wearing a Confederate uniform to dignify public occasions and sentimentalize the Civil War. This satire is as perfectly composed, richly ironic and hilarious as any by Jonathan Swift or Mark Twain.

Racial integration and relations between whites and blacks in the South are dramatized through brilliant ironic parallelism in "Everything That Rises Must Converge," the title story of her second collection in 1965—a quotation from the Catholic theologian Teilhard de Chardin, her favorite philosopher. Racial issues are also addressed with complexity in "The Artificial Nigger," "Judgment Day," and the very humorous "Revelation." In several of her stories written in high school she took the point of view of black characters. The black writer Alice Walker, who lived near her, read O'Connor's stories "endlessly" in college, found her portrayals of blacks accurate and was "scarcely conscious of the difference between her racial and economic background and my own." O'Connor explained that "What I had in mind to suggest with the artificial nigger was the redemptive quality of the Negro's suffering for us all." In 1963 she wrote a friend, "I feel very good about those changes in the South that have been long overdue—the whole racial picture. I think it is improving by the minute, particularly in Georgia, and I don't see how anybody could feel otherwise than good about that."



### *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960)

Tarwater is a backwoods southern boy of 14 who rebels against his great-uncle and his prophecy of doom. After the old man dies, Tarwater joins his atheist cousin Rayber in a neighboring town. The novel is full of grotesques and dramatizes the conflict between the religious Tarwater and the atheist Rayber, a politically correct liberal schoolteacher representing the decadent Postmodernist trend in education. The contrasting of two characters, as in *Wise Blood*, is more intense in this novel, which has often been compared in particular to *As I Lay Dying* (1930). Surprisingly, the characters in *The Violent Bear It Away* are also comparable to those in *The Scarlet Letter*. This masterpiece received mixed reviews like her first novel. O'Connor rightly thought that both favorable and unfavorable reviewers had misunderstood the novel but she was encouraged by praise in letters from Lowell, Andrew Lytle, and Robert Penn Warren. Most critics preferred her short stories to her novels as easier to understand—traditional Realism for the most part rather than expressionistic Modernism.

In 1961 her story "Everything That Rises Must Converge," with a title from Tielhard de Chardin, won first prize in the O. Henrys. In 1963 the opening chapter of a novel-in-progress appeared in *Esquire*, and her two novels were published with her first collection in *Three by Flannery O'Connor*. With her time running out, she set aside her novel-in-progress to write the hilarious story "Revelation." Just before Christmas she fainted and had to spend over a week in bed.

### ON HER WRITING

"The basis of art is truth, both in matter and in mode" [Realism]; "Fiction is an art that calls for the strictest attention to the real"; "Fiction begins where human knowledge begins—with the senses"; "The fiction writer doesn't state, he shows, renders"; "The more a writer wishes to make the supernatural apparent, the more real he has to be able to make the natural world"; "You have got to learn to paint with words" [Impressionism]; "The realism of each novelist will depend upon his view of the ultimate reaches of reality." "The chief difference between the novelist who is an orthodox Christian and the novelist who is merely a naturalist is that the Christian novelist lives in a larger universe. He believes that the natural world contains the supernatural." "The serious fiction writer always writes about the whole world."

"Fiction is the concrete expression of mystery—mystery that is lived"; "The fiction writer presents mystery through manners, grace through nature, but when he finishes, there always has to be left over that sense of Mystery which cannot be accounted for by any human formula"; "A story is good when you continue to see more and more in it, and when it continues to escape you"; "In good fiction, certain of the details will tend to accumulate meaning from the story itself, and when this happens, they become symbolic in their action"; "These are details that, while having their essential place in the literal level of the story, operate in depth as well as on the surface, increasing the story in every direction" [iceberg principle]; "[I'm] looking for one image that will connect or combine or embody two points; one is a point in the concrete and the other is a point not visible to the naked eye" [allegory].

"It seems to me that all good stories are about conversion, about a character's changing"; "The greatest dramas naturally involve the salvation or loss of the soul"; "My subject in fiction is the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil"; "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 and brutal"; "The stories are hard but they are hard because there is nothing harder or less sentimental than Christian realism"; "When I see these stories described as horror stories I am always amused because the reviewer always has hold of the wrong horror"; "The kind of vision the reader needs to have, or to develop, in order to increase the meaning of his story is called anagogical vision [allegorical interpretation of life in relation to the afterlife and the concrete in relation to Spirit], and that is the kind of vision that is able to see different levels of reality"; "The artist penetrates the concrete world in order to find at its depths the image of its source, the image of ultimate reality."

"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"; "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"; "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; and he may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get his voice across to this hostile audience. When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax 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—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures”; “The truth is not distorted here, but rather a distortion is used to get at truth” [Expressionism]; “This fiction is going to be wild”; “It is almost of necessity going to be violent and comic because of the discrepancies that it seeks to combine”; “It is this kind of realism that goes into great novels. It is the realism which does not hesitate to distort appearances in order to show a hidden truth”; “Technique works best when it is unconscious.”

## CRITICS

O’Connor was a rigorous critic of her own work. At the age of 10 she liked to sit fully clothed in a dry old bathtub with a friend who read aloud from her writing. “Stop right there,” she would interrupt. “Would you read that over again?” Throughout her life she welcomed criticism of her manuscripts from trusted writers, mainly her friend Carolyn Gordon, and she often made extensive revisions in response. She revised “endlessly,” according to observers. She joked, “When the grim reaper comes to get me, he’ll have to give me a few extra hours to revise my last words.”

She was patient with obtuse criticism. “There will always be people who will refuse to read the story you have written”; “Your critique is too far from the spirit of the book to make me want to go into it with you in detail”; “Your criticism sounds to me as if you have read too many critical books and are too smart in an artificial, destructive, and very limited way”; “The interpretation of your ninety students and three teachers is fantastic and about as far from my intentions as it could get to be”; “In short, I am amenable to criticism, but only within the sphere of what I am trying to do”; “Too much interpretation is certainly worse than too little, and where feeling for a story is absent, theory will not supply it”; “No matter how favorable all the critics in New York City may be, they are an unreliable lot.”

“After my book came out I had a letter from a relative saying, ‘You are correct. I do not like your novel. The world is depressing enough as it is and your mission is to cheer us up.’ My cousin was confusing the mission of the novelist with that of the organ-grinder”; “These people see the novel as an escape from reality, whereas the novelist sees it as a penetration of reality”; “I think that the fiction writer comes in for more ignorant criticism today, by just anybody, than does any other kind of artist. There’s always a loud voice coming from somewhere that tells him he is not doing his duty”; “Anyone who can read a seed catalogue thinks he can read a novel or a short story”; “You are eventually going to get a letter from some old lady in California or some inmate of the federal penitentiary or the state asylum or the local poor house telling you where you have failed to meet his needs”; “One old lady who wants her heart lifted up wouldn’t be so bad, but you multiply her by two hundred and fifty thousand times and what you get is a book club”; “The heart of my message to them [a women’s book club] was that they would all fry in Hell if they didn’t quit reading trash.”

## DEATH

By the age of 39 she was suffering from extreme anemia caused by a benign tumor. She corrected proofs of “Revelation” in the hospital the day before her surgery removing the tumor. The operation reactivated her lupus, caused infections and further weakened her, yet she continued finishing stories, including one of her greatest, “Parker’s Back.” To a friend she wrote, “I look like a bull frog but I can work.” In the hospital she hid her notebook from her doctor under her pillow.

She received transfusions and cortisone but could not regain her strength and had a priest administer Extreme Unction in anticipation of death. She continued revising “Parker’s Back” until she had exhausted herself. “We are judged by how hard we use what we have been given.” Just before she slipped into a coma and died, she learned that “Revelation” had won her *third first prize* in the O. Henrys. Katherine Anne Porter wrote of her, “I loved and valued her dearly, her work and her strange unworldly radiance of spirit in a human being so intelligent and so undeceived by the appearance of things....It is a great loss.” O’Connor is buried beside her father in Memory Hill Cemetery in Milledgeville.

## JUBILATION

“Lately, I have had a recurrent dream,” she wrote: “I am five years old and a peacock. A photographer has been sent from New York and a long table is laid in celebration. The meal is to be an exceptional one: myself. I scream, ‘Help! Help!’ and awaken. Then from the pond and the barn and the trees around the house, I hear that chorus of jubilation begin...I intend to stand firm and let the peacocks multiply, for I am sure that, in the end, the last word will be theirs.” (“The King of the Birds,” 1961)

Her recurrent dream is an allegory that encapsulates her spiritual life: Literally, she is like a child in her weakness, but spiritually she has been reborn. She has become like Christ in the Church, symbolized by becoming a peacock. Her dream evokes the last supper and inverts the sacrament of the Eucharist, blending tones like her writing: religious, satirical, and comic. As a Christian writer, she had been condemned like Christ by nonbelievers. Atheist critics, epitomized by those in New York, had roasted her. Finally she cries out for release and her prayer is answered. Through death she awakens to her salvation and is welcomed by a chorus of jubilation greeting her in Paradise.

Michael Hollister (2013)

## GRACE

“There is a moment of grace in most of the stories, or a moment where it is offered, and is usually rejected. Like when the Grandmother recognizes the Misfit as one of her own children and reaches out to touch him. It’s the moment of grace for her anyway—a silly old woman—but it leads him to shoot her. This moment of grace excites the devil to frenzy.” (Letter, 4 February 1960) In my stories I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work.” “You should be on the lookout for such things as the action of grace on the Grandmother’s soul, and not for the dead bodies.”

O’Connor

“Grace is God’s personal attitude toward man, His action and influence upon him...The attitude of spontaneous, uncaused favor with which God regards man expresses itself fully in the life, words, deeds, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth...This love evokes from us a response, faith, which is our self-giving trust in, our commitment and obedience to, God in Christ...‘For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—not because of works.’ (Ephesians 2:8). Grace (love), manifest in Christ, elicits from us faith by capturing our wills, not by infusing into us a new faculty...We stand in grace because faith binds us to Christ...This union with Christ shapes our lives into likeness to Christ. Grace...becomes a synonym for the Spirit of Christ (the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit). Grace as Holy Spirit is the operative power of God’s personal influence recreating us, fulfilling our created potentialities and moving us toward that which God intends us to be.”

A. T. Mollegen  
*A Handbook of Christian Theology*  
(World/Meridian 1958-1964) 154-55

“O’Connor’s Catholicism is centered in the Incarnation of Christ. It affirms the freedom of all persons to accept or reject God’s grace, with each one’s choice confirmed by God at death for eternity...What separates her situation from Dante’s is not only that her basic beliefs were not shared; they were, she thought, not even intelligible to the average reader:...O’Connor imagined her typical reader to resemble the generation of wingless chickens for whom God is dead...Her goal is not only to make it impossible to deny the sacred as present in the midst of the secular; it is to make it impossible to rest easy with any notion of secularity at all...O’Connor views the grotesque as a primary way to reach the unbelieving reader...She maintains that the grotesque expresses the tension and discrepancies that arise when grace is at work in a nature that either resists it or is struggling to comply...Distortion and exaggeration, then, become her means of revelation.”

Peter S. Hawkins  
*The Language of Grace: Flannery O’Connor, Walker Percy, & Iris Murdoch*  
(Cowley 1983) 20, 23-24, 27-29

“I am the one on the left; the one on the right side is the Muse. This is a copy of a self-portrait I painted three years ago. Nobody admires my painting much but me. Of course this is not exactly the way I look but it’s the way I feel. It’s better looked at from a distance.”

Letter (20 October 1955)

“In the self-portrait that is not a peacock. That’s a pheasant cock. I used to raise pheasants but they got too much for me as they require attention and have to be caged. The peacocks take care of themselves. But I like very much the look of the pheasant cock. He has horns and a face like the devil. The self-portrait was made ten years ago, after a very acute siege of lupus. I was taking cortisone which gives you what they call a moon-face and my hair had fallen out to a large extent from the high fever, so I looked pretty much like the portrait. When I painted it I didn’t look either at myself in the mirror or at the bird. I knew what we both looked like.”

Letter (19 June 1963)

#### The Peacock Roosts (1953)

The clown-faced peacock  
Dragging sixty suns  
Barely looks west where  
The single one  
Goes down in fire.

Bluer than moon-side sky  
The trigger head  
Circles and backs.  
The folded forest squats and flies  
The ancient design is raised.

Gripped oak cannot be moved.  
This bird looks down  
And settles, ready.  
Now the leaves can start the wind  
That combs these suns

Hung all night in the gold-green silk wood  
Or blown straight back until  
The single one  
Mounting the grey light  
Will see the flying forest  
Leave the tree and run.

“You can’t have a peacock anywhere without having a map of the universe. The priest [in “The Displaced Person”] sees the peacock as standing for the Transfiguration, for which it is certainly a most beautiful symbol. It also stands in medieval symbology for the Church—

The eyes are the eyes of the Church.”

Letter (25 November 1955)

“The peacock is a great comic bird with five different screaming squawks. The eyes in the tail stand for the eyes of the Church. I have a flock of about thirty so I am surrounded.”

Letter (25 February 1963)

“The peacock, which is indisputably the most sumptuous of the domestic birds in our clime, offered a ‘ready-made’ symbol. Its incorruptible flesh, its plumage reappearing in the spring, permitted making it an image of the Savior, who had escaped the corruption of the tomb and who was reborn each year in the spring in a dazzling burst of splendor.”

Henry LeClerq  
“Peacock”

*Dictionnaire D’Archeologie Chretienne et de Liturgie* (1937)

Michael Hollister (2018)



Leon V. Driskell

(1932- )

To Flannery O’Connor (1925-1964)

In August light, she began her night.  
Closing her eyes, she let in the dark  
Where light had burned so bright.  
She left a legacy of burning rays,  
Darkly to light the works of days.

If for her some welcome darkness  
Came at last when she died,  
We remain now in her greater light,  
Ears dazzled by the Word she cried,  
Eyes opened to let in the dark.

For now, a dark line of trees shivers  
And moves, and we, like blind men cured,  
See not trees but men, and they dance  
The joy of a world of blind men cured,  
As the bush quivers, kindles, flames.

Her vision burns our virtues clean.

Out of darkness comes a burning light  
To burn clean our eyes for the night  
With signs of Grace in multiple eyes  
Of spreading peacock tails, or in one  
Glowing eye of the every-constant sun,  
Ivory-soft as the elevated Host,  
But soaked in sunset blood.

Her darkness is the only light.

