

WIT & HUMOR

“A Late Encounter with the Enemy” (1953)

Flannery O’Connor

(1925-1964)

ANALYSIS

“One-hundred-year-old General Sash’s perpetual exclamations about ‘pretty guls’ and the ‘preemy’ in Atlanta [obviously refer] to the opening of *Gone With the Wind*.... George Poker Sash [is] an ugly, senile, moribund veteran of the Confederate Army who is interested only in ‘pretty guls’ and cannot remember his experiences in the Civil War... The old man’s granddaughter, Sally Poker Sash, has no genuine understanding of the past; she abuses it by attempting to elevate herself through identification with her grandfather. Graduating from college after twenty years of summer school, Sally Poker insists that the old man be on the commencement platform as a dignitary; through this device she intends to show *them* what she stands for: ‘This *them* as not anybody in particular. It was just all the upstarts who had turned the world on its head and unsettled the ways of decent living’.... [Irony: She] is a type of modern woman satirized in several of the stories [such as Ruby Hill in “A Stroke of Good Fortune”].... Sally Poker Sash has sacrificed marriage and maternity for a degree in elementary education....

The true dignity which invests the past is defiled by the woman’s deplorable vulgarity and foolish pride. The theme of this satire is broadened considerably by the inclusion of flashbacks of the events which altered the old man’s past to feed the puerile vanity of the present. George Sash cannot remember whether he was a private or a captain, and yet he is presented as General Tennessee Flintrock Sash to the public attending the premiere of *Gone With the Wind*... The satirical theme is that the South desecrates its past by perverting it for selfish reasons, public as well as private.... Teachers, such as Sally Poke Sash in ‘A Late Encounter with the Enemy,’ Mary George Fox in ‘The Enduring Chill,’ and Wesley May in ‘Greenleaf’ are consistently portrayed unfavorably—not as teachers but as examples of the deplorable chasm between the ideals and the actualities of education... The professional bearers of knowledge are often further from the truth than the illiterates.”

Carter W. Martin

The True Country: Themes in the Fiction of Flannery O’Connor
(Vanderbilt 1968) 193, 218-20, 223

“‘A Late Encounter with the Enemy’ again underlines man’s vanity and its futility in the light of eternal matters. Old ‘General’ Sash, whose chief memory has been the ‘preemy they had in Atlanta,’ had no use for history ‘because he never expected to meet it again.’ He and his granddaughter Sally Poker Sash are vain, but in different ways. She wants all the ‘upstarts who had turned the world on its head and unsettled the ways of decent living’ to see her grandfather so they will know ‘what all was behind her.’ The old soldier’s vanity is purely in himself, his uniform, and his ‘soword,’ given him by a movie public relations man named Govisky. His flight from history ends with the past and future converging in the present as he dies, and ironically, his Boy Scout attendant bumps the corpse out the back way to wait in ‘the long line at the Coca-Cola machine’.”

Leon V. Driskell & Joan T. Brittain

The Eternal Crossroads: The Art of Flannery O’Connor
(U Kentucky 1971) 74

“General Tennessee Flintrock Sash, the one hundred and four year-old artifact of the Civil War...is the epitome of the cultural grotesque, because he represents not the substance of a tradition (for he wasn’t really a general in the war), but rather the desiccation of it. As the representative of a dying tradition General Sash is appropriately more dead than alive: part of his body is already petrified, and the rest of him has atrophied to the point where he is ‘as frail as a spider.’ Even his name, Flintrock, is suggestive, for it implies that he is hard and inanimate. One of the finest touches in this story—his continual metamorphosis

into a relic—reinforces this impression of his inanimate character. The general has been used as a Hollywood publicity gimmick, and he is loaned annually to the museum for Confederate Memorial Day; and when the antebellum homes are opened in the springtime, he is invited ‘to wear his uniform and sit in some conspicuous spot and lend atmosphere to the scene.’

This depiction is consummately humorous, permitting the story to be enjoyed as a satire on the southern myth of magnolias and moonlight... The comedy is annihilating: its destructive force is employed in such a way as to produce an estrangement within the cultural setting that is typical of the grotesque. Both the general and his granddaughter, Sally Poker Sash, confuse the past with the present, a complicated circumstance in which the laws of causality are seemingly suspended. Their invincibility is predicated upon their ability to resuscitate the old traditions of dignity, honor, and courage; but these are effectively challenged by their own vanity and by two symbols of modernity—a Boy Scout who leaves the general sitting in the sun, thereby precipitating his stroke, and a Coca Cola machine. Thus the ultimate enemy to which the title of the story alludes is this new tradition, for the parable of historical glory is grotesquely undercut by these new cultural symbols.”

Gilbert H. Muller

Nightmares and Visions: Flannery O'Connor and the Catholic Grotesque
(U Georgia 1972) 41-42

“Sally Poker’s dream of her grandfather sitting naked (except for his hat) on the stage at her graduation symbolizes the power of death to strip one of illusions.... At the moment of death, history becomes significant as the past rushes into his mind and forces his vision into the future.... [This is] one of the most significant ideas in her fiction: that death, the convergence of time and eternity, places the individual’s life in the perspective of history—personal, social, and biblical.... Life derives its meaning from the context of history.... ‘A Late Encounter with the Enemy’ renders imaginatively the concept of time moving into eternity in the life of one individual who is acting as a representative of history.... [His] lack of awareness of Southern history, in which he has played a part, evidently precludes, for him, an awareness of the larger history of salvation which lies behind it....

The first half of the story explains this lack of perception by showing the old man reacting to life around him only in terms of his ego. Because his memory is as dead as his dangling feet, he accepts and revels in the romanticizing of history which the story illustrates by describing the premiere of a movie (indubitably *Gone With the Wind*) which mythologizes the Civil War. Flannery O’Connor underlines the falseness of the ‘preemy’ (the premiere) by a series of small details, such as the description of Sally Poker’s corsage... His appearance at the premiere as a hero becomes the memory that fills his mind....

Sally Poker, age sixty-two, also romanticizes history. She delights in the ‘preemy’ until she realizes, on stage, that below her long black crepe dinner dress with the rhinestone buckle are her work shoes which she had forgotten to change. Her consternation at this discovery suggests that reality has intruded into her dream.... She glances at her grandfather as she receives her diploma and does not realize that he is dead. In contrast to the schoolteacher, John Wesley, the Boy Scout nephew who precipitates the old man’s death, has no regard for history.... A member of the new generation, he disregards age, tradition—real or simulated—and instructions, in favor of a cold drink on a hot day. Wearing the General’s hat, he stops for a Coca-Cola, leaving the old man exposed to the sun. The blazing sun makes the General feel ‘as if there were a little hole beginning to widen in the top of his head,’ and death approaches to fill that hole with the black procession of history.... Words take forms and come at him ‘like musket fire.’”

Kathleen Feeley, S.S.N.D.

Flannery O'Connor: Voice of the Peacock
(Rutgers 1972; Fordham 1982) 86, 92-93, 110

“This is the only story by O’Connor to deal explicitly with that obsessive subject of so many Southern writers—the Civil War.... To his granddaughter, Sash is the embalmed symbol of her family’s greatness, and she wants him at her graduation in order to show the merely common townfolk ‘what all was behind her.’ To the public, Sash is the last living representative of the South’s glorious past, and O’Connor wonderfully undermines that image by revealing that in fact General Tennessee Flintrock Sash’s name was

George Poker Sash and that he had been only a major [?]. His more elevated name, rank, and uniform were issued by a public relations expert for a Hollywood film on the Civil War who 'honored' Sash at the film's premier in Atlanta. The General himself has no use at all for history, whether romanticized or not.... With anachronistic lustiness, Sash lives in the present...

The [story is] rendered with a perfect rhythm. It is Sash's last stand against time, history, the past, death. And he loses, overwhelmed by his submerged consciousness of the inescapable past. Almost the only words he had uttered on the graduation day were 'God damn every goddam thing to hell'.... The image of the general's pell-mell exit strips him of any dignity or grandeur he might have held in the eyes of the public... But the irony works as well against 'the public,' who, as they queue up for the native drink of Georgia, are oblivious to the presence of death among them.... While the worst exploitation of the relics of...battle is satirized...the point of the story is not that the remembrance of the war is necessarily a meaningless ritual but, rather, that if it is only a meaningless ritual in self-glorification or if it is driven from the consciousness of the South as it is driven from old Sash's mind, then it will rise like a specter again and demand battle in some other shape."

Miles Orvell

Invisible Parade: The Fiction of Flannery O'Connor
(Temple U 1972) 10-12

"General Sash is considered from many points of view—his own, his family's, the public's. The portrait that finally emerges is one of the most effectively achieved comic creations in O'Connor's canon. The comedy arises out of the many ironies.... Despite his advanced age and debilitated condition, General Sash is convinced that he is extremely handsome. He has agreed to appear onstage during his daughter's college graduation ceremony, not because he attributes any significance to the occasion itself, but because he welcomes the chance to appear in public: 'When he put on his full-dress general's uniform, he knew well enough there was nothing to match him anywhere.' The General obstinately refuses to wear teeth 'because he thought his profile was more striking without them.'

In his stubborn pride and irascible temper, the General is related to the other fierce old men who appear so frequently in O'Connor's work. Mr. Head's absurd conceit, Mr. Fortune's destructive willfulness, even old Tarwater's radical contempt for the world around him are reflected in part in the character of General Sash, whose vanity governs his attitudes toward himself and the world. 'Vanity' as such is a key concept in the story in the dual sense of an exaggerated self-esteem and of the uselessness of a life unrelated to any purpose outside itself.

To his daughter, Sally Poker Sash, the General is also a source of pride. Forced to attend the state teacher's college for the past twenty summers to complete her degree, she is at last ready to graduate at the age of sixty-two; she has prayed every night that her father will last for the ceremony. The old man's presence on stage will be public affirmation of her aristocratic heritage, proof of 'what all was behind her.' It will also serve as a stinging rebuke to those who have 'turned the world on its head and unsettled the decent ways of living.' Sally, however, suffers occasional reminders that the legend of the 'glorious upright old man' has been considerably embellished through the years. She is aware that the role he had played in the Civil War was relatively insignificant (he had probably been a foot-soldier).

When the Hollywood crew had arrived in Atlanta for the world premier of *Gone With the Wind*, she had introduced her father by his true name (George Poker Sash) and had elevated his rank only as far as Major. However, when she arranges for her parent to sit onstage with the distinguished visitors at her graduation, she informs the Dean that he was a Confederate general and that his mind is still 'clear as a bell' (by now he does not remember the war at all). Medically, the General is little more than a human vegetable: 'His feet were completely dead now, his knees worked like old hinges, his kidneys functioned when they would, but his heart persisted doggedly to beat'....

To the faithful preservers of the Southern heritage, the old man is a valuable relic out of a glorious past. Each year on Confederate Memorial Day, he is bundled up and lent to the Capital City Museum, where he is put on display along with the old Civil War artillery and uniforms. During the spring, when the plantation homes are opened for pilgrimage, he is often invited to 'sit in some conspicuous spot and lend

atmosphere to the scene'.... For the General, the past has faded to a near-total blankness; in fact...he no longer remembers the war or his part in it, although his role as participant gives him such historic value to the present age.... The...facts of history have likewise dimmed in the consciousness of this later generation. As the truth has receded, they have supplied from their own imaginations a colorful 'recollection' of their glorious heritage....

The vulgarization of the past by the glamour-minded present is epitomized in the Atlanta premiere, when usherettes in Confederate caps and short skirts held crossed Confederate and Union flags while the band played the 'Battle Hymn of the Republic.' This 'preemy' is the single event that remains clearly in the old man's mind, primarily because of the attention he received from the many Hollywood starlets imported for the occasion. The total phoniness of the entire episode is epitomized in [Sally's] 'exquisite' corsage of 'gladiola petals taken off and painted gold and put back together to look like a rose.' The artificial flower perfectly reflects the synthetic view of history favored by some Southerners. They, like the old soldier, prefer parades to processions, the past revised into a Hollywood spectacular....

Sally is successful in getting her parent onstage for her own moment of academic triumph, but he does not last through the ceremony. The dying of General Sash is one of the most effectively handled scenes of expiration in O'Connor's work. Although the most significant episode in the old man's life occurs onstage, in full view of an audience, neither he nor the onlookers are aware of what is happening. The little hole which had appeared in the old man's head while he sat in the sun now begins to widen, and into it pours a confusion of sound, visual images, and memory. The words of the speaker handing out the diplomas come at him like musket fire....

To his nephew, John Wesley Poker Sash, is delegated the task of tending to the old gentleman on the ceremonial occasion. The young Boy Scout is little concerned with his grandfather's celebrated status; to him, the old man is merely a piece of cumbersome baggage to be parked hatless in the burning sun while he (John Wesley) refreshes himself at the Coca-Cola machine."

Dorothy Walters
Flannery O'Connor
(Twayne 1973) 86-88

"One of the neglected masterpieces of the first collection... This is a tale about a senile old man who dies, dressed up in his fake confederate general's uniform, in his wheelchair on stage during the college graduation exercises where his sixty-four-year-old daughter is getting her B.S. This story, with an almost breathless succession of fine comic touches, is every bit as funny a story as 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find,' but it is also a tale...in which O'Connor succeeds in bringing her radically diverse tonal elements into harmony. We have, in other words, a hilariously comic story of an almost tall tale variety, but one which also slyly and carefully builds to a startlingly eerie climax: as the old man is overtaken by death, his memory flashes to life again and his whole past, asleep so long in his one-hundred-and-four-year-old mind, rushes upon him. The final image of the story is a fine stroke indeed; no one but the reader knows that the old man has died during the ceremonies, and at the end we see the corpse in its wheelchair, wheeled by the Boy Scout John Wesley, waiting in line at the Coca-Cola machine."

Martha Stephens
The Question of Flannery O'Connor
(Louisiana State U 1973) 148-49

"George Poker Sash [a decoration worn by Confederate generals such as Robert E. Lee in portraits and on ceremonial occasions], despite his one hundred and four years, never doubts that he will live till his granddaughter's graduation. 'Living had got to be such a habit with him that he couldn't conceive of any other condition.' He would never have consented to attend though 'if she had not promised to see to it that he sit on the stage. He liked to sit on any stage. He considered that he was still a very handsome man.' He likes to be seen and to see—"the pretty guls."

Sally Poker Sash's reason for wanting him to attend is less specific but equally demeaning. Graduating from college at the age of sixty-two, after twenty summer sessions spent fulfilling requirements that had not been law when she began teaching, 'she wanted to show what she stood for, or, as she said, "what all was

behind her,” and was not behind them. This them was not anybody in particular. It was just all the upstarts who had turned the world on its head and unsettled the ways of decent living.’ She planned to stand on the platform graduation day, holding her head high as if to say, ‘See him! See Him! My kin, all you upstarts! Glorious upright old man standing for the old traditions! Dignity! Honor! Courage! See him!’ Once she had dreamed ominously that she screamed, ‘See him! See him!’; and turned to discover the old man naked in his wheel chair except for the general’s hat. The night before her graduation the same dream punctuates a fitful sleep, but she awakens each time ‘just before she turned her head to look at him behind her.’

George Poker Sash had never been more than a major in the Civil War. He is too old now to remember what he was; he does not even remember the war. He has no use for history ‘because he never [expects] to meet it again.’ History for him is ‘a dreary black procession of questions about the past’; he likes parades, not processions, because parades are associated with life. It was on the occasion of the premiere of a great Civil War epic in Atlanta (O’Connor undoubtedly has *Gone with the Wind* in mind)—the ‘only event in the past that has any significance for him’—that he had been dubbed a general to add prestige to the celebration and had been given the name Tennessee Flintlock Sash; even at ninety-two he was spry enough to screech at the audience: ‘How I keep so young.... I kiss all the pretty guls.’ Sally Poker knows that the name and rank are fictitious, but by the time she announces his attendance at the graduation to the Dean she has glorified her own past enough to refer to her grandfather as ‘General Tennessee Flintlock Sash of the Confederacy.’ Both Sally and her grandfather have learned to feed their vanity by exploiting the past....

By the time the ceremonies begin, ‘General’ Sash has already begun his encounter with death. Sally Poker has had to break from the procession to rescue her grandfather from the sun by a Coca-Cola machine where he had been left hatless by her irresponsible nephew John Wesley. The unnecessary exposure has a fatal effect on the old man. ‘[He] felt as if there were a little hole beginning to widen in the top of his head.’ It is through this widening hole that first the music and then even the procession itself seem to want to enter. As for the oration about history there is no seeming. ‘The General made up his mind he wouldn’t listen, but the words kept seeping in through the little hole in his head.’ One apothegm partially invades his consciousness; it is a variation on Santayana’s dictum about the necessity of repeating the forgotten past: ‘If we forget the past...we won’t remember our future and it will be as well for we won’t have one.’

George Poker Sash...heard the words, Chickamauga, Shiloh, Johnston, Lee, and he knew he was inspiring all these words that meant nothing to him. He wondered if he had been a general at Chickamauga or at Lee...Old words began to stir in his head as if they were trying to wrench themselves out of place and come to life.’ The ‘long finger’ of ‘slow black music’ that makes its way into his head probes ‘various spots that were words, letting in a little light on the words and helping them to live.’ But when he says, ‘Dammit! I ain’t going to have it!’ whatever life the music was letting in to revitalize his memory is quenched, and the words become inexorable bullets of judgment from an invisible enemy—history—that should actually have been George Poker Sash’s true friend. On a level close to literal, the words are the vanity of a fabricated past....

Finally the words bring death to a man whose failure to understand the past has deprived him of any future. Just before he dies, the words, ‘coming at him like musket fire,’ riddle his body ‘in a hundred places with sharp stabs of pain.’ The places and faces he had used for vanity’s sake rush at him ‘as if the past were the only future now and he had to endure it.’ ‘General’ Sash has lived for so long off of history without having any genuine sense of its meaning that the words of revelation are never more than a final enemy he succumbs to, and Sally Poker Sash discovers too late that history has tricked her worse than her dreams, for the object of her false pride is not even a naked body—only a corpse.”

John R. May
The Pruning Word: The Parables of Flannery O’Connor
(U Notre Dame 1976) 83-86

“Ancient ‘General’ Sash...in reducing his existence to egoistic appearances at ceremonial spectacles, becomes hardly distinguishable from the historical relics that surround him at these rituals. Wheeled out like some family heirloom usually consigned to the attic, ‘every year on Confederate Memorial Day, he was bundled up and lent to the Capitol City Museum where he was displayed from one to four in a musty room full of old photographs, old uniforms, old artillery, and historic documents....

Near the end of the story she moves more intimately into the consciousness of old 'General' Sash than she had with any of her earlier protagonists.... As he sits angrily on the auditorium stage, stirred despite himself by the graduation speech...he is subjected to the rapid reliving of his long-forgotten early life.... It is O'Connor's first attempt at presenting her characteristically overpowering climactic moment as, quite literally, a vision.... The old man...is made not merely to remember his past, but actively to reexperience it, to relive it in a brief but intensely emotional episode....a revival of his imagination."

Frederick Asals

Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity
(U Georgia 1982) 92, 207-08, 212

Michael Hollister (2016)