

## WIT & HUMOR



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 4 greatest American short story writers, with Hawthorne, Hemingway, and Faulkner—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 5 best American novellas. Some critics consider her second novel *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960) even better than *Wise Blood*. 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:

Greetings from historic Milledgeville where the ladies and gents wash in separate tubs.

When I was six I had a chicken that walked backward and was in the Pathe News. I was in it too with the chicken. I was just there to assist the chicken but it was the high point of my life. Everything since has been anticlimax.

I am going to be the World Authority on Peafowl, and I hope to be offered a chair some day at the Chicken College.

I don't deserve any credit for turning the other cheek as my tongue is always in it.

I was a very ancient twelve; my views at that age would have done credit to a Civil War veteran.

I come from a family where the only emotion respectable to show is irritation. In some this tendency produces hives, in others literature, in me both.

I have never been anywhere but sick.

I am learning to walk on crutches and I feel like a large stiff anthropoid ape who has no cause to be thinking of St. Thomas or Aristotle.

I hate like sin to have my picture taken and most of them don't look much like me, or maybe they look like I'll look after I've been dead a couple of days.

My greatest exertion and pleasure these last years has been throwing the garbage to the chickens and I can still do this, though I am in danger of going with it.

I am not the sporty type.

Last summer I went to Connecticut to visit the [Robert] Fitzgeralds and smuggled three live ducks over Eastern Airlines for their children, but I have been inactive criminally since then.

When in Rome, do as you done in Milledgeville.

Where you come from is gone, where you thought you were going to never was there, and where you are is no good unless you can get away from it.

The only time I enjoy Atlanta is when I'm leaving it.

I would like to go to California for about two minutes to further these researches, though at times I feel that a feeling for the vulgar is my natural talent and don't need any particular encouragement.

I am the kind who laughs heartily at my own jokes.

Total nonretention has kept my education from being a burden to me.

I went to the Sisters to school for the first 6 years or so. They administer the True Faith with large doses of Pious Crap and at their hands I developed something the Freudians have not named—anti-angel aggression, call it. 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 fists 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.

You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you odd.

Ours is the first age in history which has asked the child what he would tolerate learning.

She had observed that the more education they got, the less they could do. Their father had gone to a one-room schoolhouse through the eighth grade and he could do anything.

Mrs. B— says she went to school for one day and didn't loin nothin and ain't went back. She has four children and I thought she was one of them.

She was a good Christian woman with a large respect for religion, though she did not, of course, believe any of it was true.

Christ in the conversation embarrassed her the way sex had her mother.

It began to drizzle rain and he turned on the windshield wipers; they made a great clatter like two idiots clapping in church.

[Mrs. Turpin reprimands God]: "Who do you think you are?"

She wanted to tell him what the girl had said. At the same time, she did not wish to put the image of herself as a wart hog from hell into his mind.

She had tried to tell him that Mary George could be very attractive when she put her mind to it and he had said that that much strain on her mind would break her down.

“She would of been a good woman,” the Misfit said, “if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.”

She could never be a saint, but she thought she could be a martyr if they killed her quick.

She began to prepare her martyrdom, seeing herself in a pair of tights in a great arena, lit by the early Christians hanging in cages of fire, making a gold dusty light that fell on her and the lions. The first lion charged forward and fell at her feet, converted.

Whenever I’m asked why Southern writers particularly have a penchant for writing about freaks, I say it is because we are still able to recognize one.

“Dear Mary, What I really want to know is should I go the whole hog or not? That’s my real problem. I’m adjusted okay to the modern world.”

I am not to be got rid of by crusty letters. I’m as insult-proof as my buff orpington hen.

Nobody appreciates my work the way I do.

The clerk said, “We don’t have that one but we have another one by that writer. It’s called THE BEAR THAT RAN AWAY WITH IT.” [*The Violent Bear It Away* has also been called THE VALIANT BEAR IT ALWAYS and THE VIOLETS BLOOM AWAY.]

You are eventually going to get a letter from some old lady in California, or some inmate of the Federal Penitentiary or the state insane asylum or the local poorhouse, 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 two hundred and fifty thousand times and what you get is a book club.

At interviews I always feel like a dry cow being milked.

Dogs who live in houses with television have paused to sniff me.

Everywhere I go, I’m asked if I think the universities stifle writers. My opinion is that they don’t stifle enough of them.

Many a bestseller could have been prevented by a good teacher.

Some people, if they learn to write badly enough, can make a lot of money.

“Miss O’Connor, the Misfit represents Christ, does he not?” “He does not,” I said. He looked crushed. “Well, Miss O’Connor,” he said, “what is the significance of the Misfit’s hat?” I said it was to cover his head; and after that he left me alone. Anyway, that’s what’s happening to the teaching of literature.

Wesley, the younger child, had had rheumatic fever when he was seven and Mrs. May thought this was what had caused him to be an intellectual.

“That’s the trouble with you innerleckchuls,” Onnie Jay muttered, “you don’t never have nothing to show for what you’re saying.”

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.

At Emory they had a little dinner party before I talked, a table full of College Liberals. One gent said, "I'm working with a group on interpersonal relations." Somebody asked what interpersonal relations were and one of the novelists said, "He means niggers and whitefolks."

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 at that point in life to create an unfavorable impression.

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.

Lately I have had a recurrent dream: 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.