

## 330 QUOTATIONS



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 *Wise Blood* (1952), filmed by John Huston, has a Modernist complexity comparable to James Joyce and is one of the best short novels in world literature. Some 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.

At age 25 she was diagnosed with lupus and given 5 years to live, 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," and "The Displaced Person." Another of the funniest is "A Late Encounter with the Enemy." The common reader is likely to enjoy her storytelling, humor, dramatic plots, vivid characters, and bizarre situations without noticing her religion. The grotesque characters in her work are metaphors of spiritual deformity, as O'Connor is a Catholic who like T. S. Eliot transcends the expanding spiritual wasteland of Postmodernism.

ORDER OF TOPICS: autobiographical, illness, criminal history, place, The South, race, psychology, education, college, reading, Nature, seeing, metaphysics, determinism, God, Faith, grace, salvation, Catholicism, The Church, Protestants, hypocrites, morality, sex, Hell, Neoclassicism, Christian Realism, Impressionism, Expressionism, the grotesque, humor, Modernism, writing, fiction, her own fiction, symbols, anagogical vision, prophecy, allegory, audience, criticism, New Criticism, interpretation, Southern writers, Beat writers, liberals, political correctness, Postmodernism, Postmodern novels, shrunken Jesus, manners, death:

### AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL

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

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

Anybody who has survived his childhood has enough information about life to last him the rest of his days.

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 was a very ancient twelve; my views at that age would have done credit to a Civil War veteran. Anyway, I went through the years 13 to 20 in a very surly way.

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 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.

I do fine talking to people who don't know anything.

I love a lot of people, understand none of them.

#### ILLNESS

I have never been anywhere but sick.

I can, with one eye squinting, take it all as a blessing.

Sickness is more instructive than a long trip to Europe.

I give the appearance of merely being a little drunk all the time.

I write only about two hours every day because that's all the energy I have.

It requires some decision for me at this point to cross the room, much less the ocean.

The disease is of no consequence to my writing, since for that I use my head and not my feet.

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.

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 swinging around on two aluminum legs.

I am not the sporty type.

#### CRIMINAL HISTORY

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.

## PLACE

Somewhere is better than anywhere.

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

I have 27 [peacocks] right now. This place sounds like the jungle at night as they yell and scream at the slightest atmospheric disturbance or mechanical noise.

My mama is thinking about getting a Hungarian family. We still have the Poles but they are mighty trying and trifling at this point. She will not let them go but they do very little.

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.

It is a great blessing, perhaps the greatest blessing a writer can have, to find at home what others have to go elsewhere seeking.

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.

When in Rome, do as you done in Milledgeville.

## THE SOUTH

We have had our Fall [losing the Civil War].

Here belief can still be made believable, even if for the modern mind it cannot be made admirable.

The woods are full of regional writers, and it is the great horror of every serious Southern writer that he will become one of them.

The best American fiction has always been regional. The ascendancy passed roughly from New England to the Midwest to the South; it has passed to and stayed longest wherever there has been a shared past, a sense of likeness, and the possibility of reading a small history in a universal light.

We in the South live in a society that is rich in contradiction, rich in irony, rich in contrast, and particularly rich in its speech.

The South and the religion found there are extremely fluid and offer enough variety to give the novelist the widest range of possibilities imaginable, for the novelist is bound by the reasonable possibilities, not the probabilities of his culture.

What has given the South her identity are those beliefs and qualities which she has absorbed from the Scriptures and from her own history of defeat and violation: a distrust of the abstract, a sense of human dependence on the grace of God, and a knowledge that evil is not simply a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be endured.

The anguish that most of us have observed for some time now has been caused not by the fact that the South is alienated from the rest of the country, but by the fact that it is not alienated enough, that every day we are getting more and more like the rest of the country, that we are being forced out not only of our many sins, but of our few virtues.

My opinion is that the Southern Young Man of Parts is busy building himself up to be Quentin [romantic adolescent who commits suicide at Harvard in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*]. I think they all want to

go to Harvard or Princeton so they can sit in a window and say I hate it I hate it but I have to go back. Or maybe they only learn to say it after they get up there.

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

### RACE

In Southern literature the Negro, without losing his individuality, is a figure for our darker selves, our shadow side.

What I had in mind to suggest with the artificial nigger was the redemptive quality of the Negro's suffering for us all.

It was one of those moments of communion when the difference between black and white is absorbed into nothing.

### PSYCHOLOGY

I have recently been reading some depth psychologists, mainly Jung, Neumann, and a Dominican, Victor White (God and the unconscious).

In heaven's name where do you get the idea that Sheppard ["The Lame Shall Enter First"] represents Freud?

I do hope...that you will get over the kind of thinking that sees in every door handle a phallic symbol and that ascribes such intentions to those who have other fish to fry. The Freudian technique can be applied to anything at all with equally ridiculous results.

Enoch's brain was divided into two parts. The part in communication with his blood did the figuring but it never said anything in words. The other part was stocked up with all kinds of words and phrases.

### EDUCATION

I have always been a very innocent speller.

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

The result of the proper study of a novel should be contemplation of the mystery embodied in it.

For nearly two centuries the popular spirit of each succeeding generation has tended more and more to the view that the mysteries of life will eventually fall before the mind of man.

Mystery isn't something that is gradually evaporating. It grows along with knowledge.

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.

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.

I went to a progressive highschool where one did not read if one did not wish to.

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

A great many high-school graduates go to college not knowing that a period ordinarily follows the end of a sentence.

English teachers come in Good, Bad, and Indifferent, but too frequently in high schools anyone who can speak English is allowed to teach it.

The high-school English teacher will be fulfilling his responsibility if he furnishes the student a guided opportunity, through the best writing of the past, to come, in time, to an understanding of the best writing of the present. [In the tradition of Pound and Eliot called New Criticism] He will teach literature, not social studies or little lessons in democracy or the customs of many lands [Political Correctness]. And if the student finds that this is not to his taste? Well, that is regrettable. His taste should not be consulted; it is being formed.

#### COLLEGE

The historical sense is greatly in decay.

Our children are too stupid now to enter the past imaginatively.

Many students go to college unaware that the world was not made yesterday.

When I went to college twenty years ago, nobody mentioned any good Southern writers to me later than Joel Chandler Harris, and the ones mentioned before Harris, with the exception of Poe, were not widely known outside the region. As far as I knew, the heroes of Hawthorne and Melville and James and Crane and Hemingway were balanced on the Southern side by Br'er Rabbit.

I had never heard of K. A. Porter or Faulkner or Eudora Welty until I got to graduate school.

In college I read works of social science, so-called.

Don't mix up thought-knowledge with felt-knowledge.

Life is the will of God and this cannot be explained by the professors.

My degree hasn't done a thing for me so far.

#### READING

I can't help loving St. Thomas [Aquinas].

Dante is about as great as you can get.

Hawthorne was a very great writer indeed.

I don't think there is any writer I like so much as Conrad.

The most important non-fiction writer is Pere Pierre Teilhard de Chardin S.J."

Hawthorne interests me considerably. I feel more of a kinship with him than with any other American.

Have you read *What Maisie Knew*?... [Henry James] You sometimes think the child must have a bald head and a swallow tail coat; nevertheless it is a very moving book.

I read all the Catholic novelists, Mauriac, Bernanos, Bloy, Green, Waugh; I read all the nuts like Djuna Barnes and Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolfe (unfair to the dear lady of course); I read the best Southern writers like Faulkner and the Tates, K. A. Porter, Eudora Welty and Peter Taylor; read the Russians, not Tolstoi so much but Dostoievski, Turgenev, Chekhov and Gogol. I became a great admirer of Conrad and have read almost all of his fiction. I have totally skipped such people as Dreiser, Anderson (except for a few stories) and Thomas Wolfe. I have learned something from Hawthorne, Flaubert, Balzac and something from Kafka, though I have never been able to finish one of his novels. I've read almost all of Henry James—from a sense of High Duty and because when I read James I feel something is happening to me, in slow motion but happening nevertheless. I admire Dr. Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*. But always the largest thing that looms up is *The Humorous Tales of Edgar Allan Poe*. I am sure he wrote them all while drunk too.... [Nathanael] West may have had some influence on me stylistically.... Then I discovered the Germans—Max Picard, Romano Guardini and Karl Adam....

I've been reading Shakespeare [also Joyce, Hemingway, Celine, Proust, Simone Weil, Edith Stein, Max Beerbohm, J. F. Powers, Samuel Beckett, Robert Lowell, Gunter Grass, Evelyn Underhill, Graham Greene, George Orwell, Hannah Arendt, Vladimir Nabokov, Kingsley Amis, Bernard Malamud, John Hawkes, Caroline Gordon, Walker Percy]

We have very few thinkers to equal [Karl] Barth and Tillich, perhaps none.

Do you read *The National Geographic* or do you smell it? I smell it.

#### NATURE

Only when the natural world is seen as good does evil become intelligible as a destructive force and a necessary result of our freedom.

Children, particularly in numbers, are quite capable of committing the most monstrous crimes out of the urge to destroy and humiliate.

I believe that all creation is good but that what has free choice is more completely God's image than what does not have it.

If you believe in the divinity of Christ, you have to cherish the world at the same time that you struggle to endure it.

Human nature is so faulty that it can resist any amount of grace and most of the time it does.

#### SEEING

Your beliefs will be the light by which you see, but they will not be what you see and they will not be a substitute for seeing.

It is what is invisible that God sees and that the Christian must look for.

I don't even have a television.

#### METAPHYSICS

Our life is and will remain essentially mysterious.

For me the visible universe is a reflection of the invisible universe.

## DETERMINISM

I don't think literature would be possible in a determined world. We might go through the motions but the heart would be out of it.... I think the more you write, the less inclined you will be to rely on theories like determinism.

## GOD

If there's no bottom to your eyes, they hold more.

God made us to love Him. It takes two to love.

God is to be experienced in Charity (in the sense of love for the divine image in human beings).

God is pure Spirit but our salvation was accomplished when the Spirit was made flesh [in Christ].

God has given us reason to use and...it can lead us toward a knowledge of Him, through analogy... He has revealed himself in history.

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.

One of the tendencies of our age is to use the suffering of children to discredit the goodness of God, and once you have discredited His goodness, you are done with Him.... In this popular pity, we mark our gain in sensibility and loss in vision.

If I ever do get to be a fine writer, it will not be because I am a fine writer but because God has given me credit for a few of the things He kindly wrote for me.

When a book leaves your hands, it belongs to God. He may use it to save a few souls or to try a few others, but I think that for the writer to worry is to take over God's business.

## FAITH

Faith is what you have in the absence of knowledge.

Faith is what someone knows to be true, whether they believe it or not.

Faith comes and goes. It rises and falls like the tides of an invisible ocean. If it is presumptuous to think that faith will stay with you forever, it is just as presumptuous to think that unbelief will.

There are some of us who have to pay for our faith every step of the way and who have to work out dramatically what it would be like without it and if being without it would be ultimately possible or not.

I have heard it said that belief in Christian dogma is a hindrance to the writer, but I myself have found nothing further from the truth. Actually, it frees the storyteller to observe. 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.

Dogma is an instrument for penetrating reality.

## GRACE

We don't believe that grace is something you have to feel.

Often the nature of grace can be made plain only by describing its absence.

All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and change is painful.

Our age not only does not have a very sharp eye for the almost imperceptible intrusions of grace, it no longer has much feeling for the nature of the violences which precede and follow them.

Today's reader, if he believes in grace at all, sees it as something which can be separated from nature and served to him raw as Instant Uplift.

You cannot show the operation of grace when grace is cut off from nature or when the very possibility of grace is denied, because no one will have the least idea of what you are about.

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—such as the moment when the Grandmother realizes the Misfit is one of her own children. ["A Good Man Is Hard to Find"] These moments are prepared for (by me anyway) by the intensity of the evil circumstances.

#### SALVATION

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.

I don't think of conversion as being once and for all and that's that. I think once the process is begun and continues that you are continually turning inward toward God and away from your own egocentricity and that you have to see this selfish side of yourself in order to turn away from it.

#### CATHOLICISM

I don't believe that you can *impose* orthodoxy on fiction.

Although I am a Catholic writer, I don't care to get labeled as such in the popular sense of it, as it is then assumed that you have some religious axe to grind.

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.

The Catholic sacramental view of life is one that sustains and supports at every turn the [anagogical] vision that the storyteller must have if he is going to write fiction of any depth.

What he sees at all times is fallen man perverted by false philosophies.

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 Catholic novelist believes that you destroy your freedom by sin; the modern reader believes, I think, that you gain it in that way.

The Catholic novelist in the South will see many distorted images of Christ, but he will certainly feel that a distorted image of Christ is better than no image at all.

I think [the Catholic novelist in the South] will feel a good deal more kinship with backwoods prophets and shouting fundamentalists than he will 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.

Dogma is the guardian of mystery.



## THE CHURCH

I distrust pious phrases, especially when they issue from my mouth.

No priest has ever said turkey-dog to me about liking anything I wrote.

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 Church teaches that those who live according to the light they have received will be saved—this goes for sincere pagans, Jews, etc.

For us the Church is the body of Christ, Christ continuing in time, and as such a divine institution. The Protestant considers this idolatry.

## PROTESTANTS

Most of the Protestants I know are good, if narrow sometimes.

One of the effects of modern liberal Protestantism has been gradually to turn religion into poetry and therapy, to make truth vaguer and vaguer and more and more relative, to banish intellectual distinctions, to depend on feeling instead of thought, and gradually to come to believe that God has no power, that he cannot communicate with us, cannot reveal himself to us, indeed has not done so, and that religion is our own sweet invention.

The religion of the South is a do-it yourself religion, something which I as a Catholic find painful and touching and grimly comic. It's full of unconscious pride that lands them in all sorts of ridiculous religious predicaments. They have nothing to correct their practical heresies and so they work them out dramatically. If this were merely comic to me, it would be no good, but I accept the same fundamental doctrines of sin and redemption and judgment that they do.

## HYPOCRITS

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

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

## MORALITY

The human comes before art.

God can be known through charity.

The good is something under construction.

The first product of self-knowledge is humility.

Conviction without experience makes for harshness.

We are judged by how hard we use what we have been given.

A working knowledge of the devil can be very well had from resisting him.

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

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

#### SEX

Man’s desire for God is bedded in his unconscious & seeks to satisfy itself in physical possession of another human. This necessarily is a passing, fading attachment in its sensuous aspects since it is a poor substitute for what the unconscious is after. The more conscious the desire for God becomes the more successful union with another becomes because the intelligence realizes the relation in its relation to a greater desire & if this intelligence is in both parties the motive power in the desire for God becomes double & gains in becoming God-like. The modern man isolated from faith, from raising his desire for God into a conscious desire, is sunk into the position of seeing physical love as an end in itself. Thus his romanticizing it, wallowing in it, & then cynicizing it... The Sex act is a religious act & when it occurs without God it is a mock act or at best an empty act.... Two people can remain “in love”—a phrase made practically useless by stinking romanticism—only if their common desire for each other unites in a greater desire for God—i.e., they do not become satisfied but more desirous together of the supernatural love in union with God. (*A Prayer Journal*, 30-32)

#### HELL

Children know by instinct that hell is an absence of love.

If there were no hell, we would be like the animals.

No hell, no dignity.

#### NEOCLASSICISM

Art transcends its limitations only by staying within them.

The artist uses his reason to discover an answering reason in everything he sees.

I do not like the raw sound of the human voice in unison unless it is under the discipline of music.

#### CHRISTIAN REALISM

My kin are given to such phrases as, “Let’s face it.”

The truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it.

The longer you look at one object, the more of the world you see in it.

The writer can choose what he writes about but he cannot choose what he is able to make live.

The more a writer wishes to make the supernatural apparent, the more real he has to be able to make the natural world.

I’m always irritated by people who imply that writing fiction is an escape from reality. It is a plunge into reality and it’s very shocking to the system.

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. [Italics added]

The limitations that any writer imposes on his work will grow out of the necessities that lie in the material itself and these will generally be more rigorous than any that religion could impose.

The term “Christian Realism” has become necessary for me, perhaps in a purely academic way, because I find myself in a world where everybody has his compartment, puts you in yours, shuts the door and departs.

### IMPRESSIONISM

You have got to learn to paint with words.

Fiction writing is very seldom a matter of saying things; it is a matter of showing things.

Reading the story is at first rather like standing a foot away from an impressionistic painting, then gradually moving back until it comes into focus. When you reach the right distance, you suddenly see that a world has been created—and a world in action—and that a complete story has been told, by a wonderful kind of understatement. It has been told more by showing what happens around the story than by touching directly on the story itself.

### EXPRESSIONISM

I approve of distortion [Expressionism] but not of abstraction.

The truth is not distorted here, but rather a distortion is used to get at truth.

Distortion in this case is an instrument; exaggeration has a purpose, and the whole structure of the story of novel has been made what it is because of belief.

The intellectual and moral judgments implicit in it will have the ascendancy over feeling.

### THE GROTESQUE

I was once mentioned in an article as belonging to the “School of the Gratuitous Grotesque.”

I use the grotesque the way I do because people are deaf and dumb and need help to see and hear.

The sharper the light of faith, the more glaring are apt to be the distortions the writer sees in the life around him.

There are ages when it is possible to woo the reader; there are others when something more drastic is necessary.

Anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the Northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic.

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.

To be able to recognize a freak, you have to have some conception of the whole man.

It is when the freak can be sensed as a figure for our essential displacement that he attains some depth in literature.

My own feeling is that writers who see by the light of their Christian faith will have, in these times, the sharpest eyes for the grotesque, for the perverse, and for the unacceptable.

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.

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.

There are strange skips and gaps which anyone trying to describe manners and customs would certainly not have left. Yet the characters have an inner coherence, if not always a coherence to their social framework. Their fictional qualities lean away from typical social patterns, toward mystery and the unexpected.

Such a writer will be interested in what we don't understand rather than in what we do. He will be interested in possibility rather than in probability.

The kind of writer I am describing will use the concrete in a more drastic way. His way will much more obviously be the way of distortion.

All novelists are fundamentally seekers and describers of the real [before Postmodernism], but the realism of each novelist will depend on his view of the ultimate reaches of reality.

When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs as you do, you can relax a little 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 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.

## HUMOR

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

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

Only if we are secure in our beliefs can we see the comical side of the universe.

I like [my stories] better than anybody and I read them over and over and laugh and laugh.

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.

"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."

Mrs. McIntyre's face assumed a set puritanical expression and she reddened. Christ in the conversation embarrassed her the way sex had her mother.

In my own experience, everything funny I have written is more terrible than it is funny, or only funny because it is terrible, or only terrible because it is funny.

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.

[Russell Kirk, prominent conservative philosopher] is about 37, looks like Humpty Dumpty (intact) with constant cigar and (outside) porkpie hat. He is non-conversational and so am I, and the times we were left

alone together our attempts to make talk were like the efforts of two midgits to cut down a California redwood.

Mrs. Tate had to tell me once that there was no such thing as bob-wire. It is barbed wire.

### MODERNISM

A limited revelation but revelation nevertheless.

The serious fiction writer always writes about the whole world.

The writer operates at a peculiar crossroads where time and place and eternity somehow meet. His problem is to find that location.

The author has for the most part absented himself from direct participation in the work and has left the reader to make his own way amid experiences dramatically rendered and symbolically ordered. The modern novelist merges the reader in the experience; he tends to raise the passions he touches upon. If he is a good novelist, he raises them to effect by their order and clarity a new experience—the total effect.

Do you know Joyce's story *The Dead*? See how he makes the snow work in that story. Chekhov makes everything work—the air, the light, the cold, the dirt, etc. Show these things and you don't have to say them.

### WRITING

Your asking me to talk about story-writing is just like asking a fish to lecture on swimming.

I write because I write well.

I write to discover what I know.

I write because I don't know what I think until I read what I say.

I work from such a basis of poverty that everything I do is a miracle to me.

I find that most people know what a story is until they sit down to write one.

I go in every day, because if any idea comes between eight and noon, I'm there all set for it.

The writer learns, perhaps more quickly than the reader, to be humble in the face of what-is.

Writing a novel is a terrible experience, during which the hair often falls out and the teeth decay.

So many people can now write competent stories that the short story as a medium is in danger of dying of competence. We want competence, but competence by itself is deadly. What is needed is the vision to go with it, and you do not get this from a writing class. [anagogical vision]

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

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

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

### FICTION

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. [Impressionism]

The fiction writer writes about life, and so anyone living considers himself an authority on it.

The first and most obvious characteristic of fiction is that it deals with reality through what can be seen, heard, smelt, tasted, and touched.

It should reinforce our sense of the supernatural by grounding it in concrete, observable reality.

Fiction is so very much an incarnational art.

Fiction is the concrete expression of mystery—mystery that is lived.

There are two qualities that make fiction. One is the sense of mystery and the other is the sense of manners.

The fiction writer presents mystery through manners, grace through nature.

Mystery is a great embarrassment to the modern mind.

Manners are those conventions which, in the hands of the artist, reveal that central mystery.

A story is a way to say something that can't be said any other way, and it takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is.

Everything has to be subordinated to a whole which is not you. Any story I reveal myself completely in will be a bad story.

No art is sunk in the self, but rather, in art the self becomes self-forgetful in order to meet the demands of the thing seen and the thing being made. [Modernism]

A story really isn't any good unless it successfully resists paraphrase, unless it hangs on and expands in the mind.

A story is good when you continue to see more and more in it, and when it continues to escape you.

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.

The fiction writer doesn't state, he shows, renders.

Technique works best when it is unconscious.

A symbol should go on deepening.

#### HER OWN FICTION

Ultimately, you write what you *can*, what God gives you.

My subject in fiction is the action of grace in territory largely held by the devil.

I wrote the book [*Wise Blood*]...not knowing too well why I did what but knowing it was right.

I am not afraid that the book will be controversial, I'm afraid it will not be controversial.

When I look at stories I have written I find that they are, for the most part, about people who are poor, who are afflicted in both mind and body, who have little—or at best a distorted—sense of spiritual purpose, and whose actions do not apparently give the reader a great assurance of the joy of life.

When the poor hold sacred history in common, they have ties to the universal and the holy, which allows the meaning of their every action to be heightened and seen under the aspect of eternity.

## SYMBOLS

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. [Hemingway's "iceberg principle"] The mind is led on by what it sees into the greater depths that the book's symbols naturally suggest. This is what is meant when critics say that a novel operates on several levels. The truer the symbol, the deeper it leads you, the more meaning it opens up.

Now the word *symbol* scares a good many people off, just as the word *art* does. They seem to feel that a symbol is some mysterious thing put in arbitrarily by the writer to frighten the common reader—sort of a literary Masonic grip that is only for the initiated.

When you start describing the significance of a symbol you immediately begin to limit it and a symbol should go on deepening.

## ANAGOGICAL VISION

[*anagogical*: allegorical interpretation of life in relation to the afterlife and the concrete in relation to Spirit]

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 one situation.

The medieval commentators on Scripture found three kinds of meaning in the literal level of the sacred text: one they called *allegorical*, in which one fact pointed to another; one they called *tropological*, or moral, which had to do with what should be done; and one they called *anagogical*, which had to do with the Divine life and our participation in it. [Italics added]

The artist penetrates the concrete world in order to find at its depths the image of its source, the image of ultimate reality.

## PROPHECY

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.

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. [Expressionism]

## ALLEGORY

He's 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.

You can't have effective allegory in times when people are swept this way and that by momentary convictions, because everyone will read it differently.

As for its being too allegorical and all the rest, I can't agree. I wanted to get across the fact that the great Uncle (Old Tarwater) is the Christian...and that the schoolteacher (Rayber) is the typical modern man.

#### AUDIENCE

My audience are the people who think God is dead.

Today's audience is one in which religious feeling has become, if not atrophied, at least vaporous and sentimental.

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.]

What I write is read by an audience which puts little stock either in grace or the devil. You discover your audience at the same time and in the same way that you discover your subject, but it is an added blow.

I have found that if one's young hero can't be identified with the average American boy, or even with the average American delinquent, then his perpetrator will have a good deal of explaining to do.

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.

I think that if her heart had been in the right place, it would have been lifted up.

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

Everybody who has read *Wise Blood* thinks I'm a hillbilly nihilist, whereas I would like to create the impression over the television that I'm a hillbilly Thomist [St. Thomas Aquinas].... When I come back I'll probably have to spend three months day and night in the chicken pen to counteract these evil influences.

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

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

Nobody appreciates my work the way I do.

#### CRITICISM

There will always be people who will refuse to read the story you have written.

In short, I am amenable to criticism, but only within the sphere of what I am trying to do; I will not pretend to do otherwise.

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.

People talk about the theme of a story as if the theme were like the string that a sack of chicken feed is tied with.

Every time a story of mine appears in a Freshman anthology, I have a vision of it, with its little organs laid open, like a frog in a bottle.



The two worst sins of bad taste in fiction are pornography and sentimentality. One is too much sex and the other too much sentiment.

No matter how favorable all the critics in New York City may be, they are an unreliable lot, as incapable now as on the day they were born of interpreting Southern literature to the world.

All these moralists who condemn *Lolita* give me the creeps.... A comic novel has its own criteria.

The silence of the Catholic critic is so often preferable to his attention.

#### NEW CRITICISM

A work of art exists without its author from the moment the words are on paper, and the more complete the work, the less important it is who wrote it or why. [Modernism]

#### INTERPRETATION

"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.

The interpretation of your ninety students and three teachers is fantastic and about as far from my intentions as it could get to be. If it were a legitimate interpretation, the story would be little more than a trick and its interest would be simply for abnormal psychology. I am not interested in abnormal psychology.... The meaning of a story should go on expanding for the reader the more he thinks about it, but meaning cannot be captured in an interpretation. If teachers are in the habit of approaching a story as if it were a research problem for which any answer is believable so long as it is not obvious, then I think students will never learn to enjoy fiction. Too much interpretation is certainly worse than too little, and where feeling for a story is absent, theory will not supply it. My tone is not meant to be obnoxious. I am in a state of shock.

Your critique is too far from the spirit of the book to make me want to go into it with you in detail.

#### SOUTHERN WRITERS

If you are a Southern writer, that label, and all the misconceptions that go with it, is pasted on you at once, and you are left to get it off as best you can.

The presence alone of Faulkner in our midst makes a great difference in what the writer can and cannot permit himself to do.

Every time I heard about The School of Southern Degeneracy, I felt like Br'er Rabbit stuck on the Tar Baby.

Most of us are considered, I believe, to be unhappy combinations of Poe and Erskine Caldwell.

I really liked Eudora Welty—no pretense whatsoever, just a real nice woman.

#### BEAT WRITERS

Mr. Ginsberg [thinks] that the way to reach God is through marijuana.

If you have read the very vocal writers from San Francisco, you may have got the impression that the first thing you must do in order to be an artist is to loose yourself from the bonds of reason, and thereafter, anything that rolls off the top of your head will be of great value. Anyone's unrestrained feelings are considered worth listening to because they are unrestrained and because they are feelings.

As long as the beat people abandon themselves to all sensual satisfactions, on principle, you can't take them for anything but false mystics. A good look at St. John of the Cross makes them all look sick. You can't trust them as poets either because they are too busy acting like poets.

It's true that grace is the free gift of God but in order to put yourself in the way of being receptive to it you have to practice self-denial.

### LIBERALS

His sense of evil is diluted or lacking altogether.

A golden heart would be a positive interference in the writing of fiction.

The writer excuses all human weakness because human weakness is human.

Accepting oneself does not preclude an attempt to become better.

They think faith is a big electric blanket, when of course it is the cross.

To expect too much is to have a sentimental view of life and this is a softness that ends in bitterness.

Sentimentality is an excess, a distortion of sentiment usually in the direction of an overemphasis on innocence and that innocence whenever it is overemphasized in the ordinary human condition, tends by some natural law to become its opposite.

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."

Those who have no absolute values cannot let the relative remain merely relative; they are always raising it to the level of the absolute.

### POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

It don't do to carp about trifles.

Art never responds to the wish to make it democratic; it is not for everybody; it is only for those who are willing to undergo the effort needed to understand it.

Librarians are the last people you can trust about the inside of books.

### POSTMODERNISM

If you live today, you breathe in nihilism.

We are now living in an age which doubts both fact and value.

A generation has been made to feel that the aim of learning is to eliminate mystery.

When there is a tendency to compartmentalize the spiritual and make it resident in a certain type of life only, the spiritual is apt gradually to be lost.

You can't fit the Almighty into your intellectual categories.

The isolated imagination is easily corrupted by theory.

Communism is a religion of the state, committed to the extinction of the Church.

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.”

At its best our age is an age of searchers and discoverers, and at its worst, an age that has domesticated despair and learned to live with it happily.

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.

#### POSTMODERN NOVELS

They told him he didn’t have a soul and left for the brothel.

Where there is no belief in the soul, there is very little drama.

When the religious need is banished successfully, it usually atrophies, even in the novelist.

Probably the devil plays the greatest role in the production of that fiction from which he himself is absent as an actor.

There was a time when the average reader read a novel simply for the moral he could get out of it, and however naïve that may have been, it was a good deal less naïve than some of the limited objectives he has now. Today novels are considered to be entirely concerned with the social or economic or psychological forces that they will by necessity exhibit, or with those details of daily life that are for the good novelists only means to some deeper end.

The modern hero is the outsider. His experience is rootless. He can go anywhere. He belongs nowhere. Being alien to nothing, he ends up being alienated from any kind of community based on common tastes and interests. The borders of his country are the sides of his skull.

The lights around the marquee were so bright that the moon, moving overhead with a small procession of clouds behind it, looked pale and insignificant.

#### SHRUNKEN JESUS

Two days out of the glass case had not improved the new Jesus’ condition. One side of his face had been partly mashed in and on the other side, his eyelid had split and a pale dust was seeping out of it... She had never known anyone who looked like him before, but there was something in him of everyone she had ever known, as if they had all been rolled into one person and killed and shrunk and dried.

A secular society understands the religious mind less and less. It becomes more and more difficult in America to make belief believable, which is what the novelist has to do. It takes less and less belief acted upon to make one appear a fanatic. When you create a character who believes vigorously in Christ, you have to explain his aberration.

#### MANNERS

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.

Manners are of such great consequence to the novelist that any kind will do. Bad manners are better than no manners at all, and because we are losing our customary manners, we are probably overly conscious of them; this seems to be a condition that produces writers.

You can be so absolutely honest and so absolutely wrong at the same time that I think it is better to be a combination of cautious and polite.

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

I look like a bull frog but I can work.

I feel lousy but I don't have much idea how I really am.

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.

