

ANALYSIS

“Revelation” (1964)

Flannery O’Connor

(1925-1964)

“One of my nurses was a dead ringer for Mrs. Turpin. Her Claud was named Otis. She told me all the time about what a good nurse she was. Her favorite grammatical construction was ‘it were.’ She said she treated everybody alike whether it were a person with money or a black nigger. She told me all about the low life in Wilkinson County. I seldom know in any given circumstance whether the Lord is giving me a reward or a punishment. She didn’t know she was funny and it was agony to laugh and I reckon she increased my pain about 100%.”

O’Connor (Letter, 14 March 1964)

“She gets the vision. Wouldn’t have been any point in that story if she hadn’t. I like Mrs. Turpin as well as Mary Grace. You got to be a very big woman to shout at the Lord across a hog pen. She’s a country female Jacob. And that vision is purgatorial.”

O’Connor (Letter, 15 May 1964)

“[One finds] a spiritually converging world where the universal domination of Christ, as an intrinsic energy, has acquired an urgency and intensity.”

John J. Burke

“Convergence of Flannery O’Connor and Chardin”

Renascence 19 (Fall 1966) 46

“A compassionate view is...taken of the good Mrs. Turpin in ‘Revelation’... She, however, is not so far gone in pride as the Mrs. McIntyres and the Mrs. Mays. (One wonders whether it is significant here that Mrs. Turpin has a living husband to whom she is devoted.) But this good, hard-working woman is singled out for a particularly nasty piece of invective when a Wellesley College student goes berserk in a small-town doctor’s office. (‘Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog.’) And Mrs. Turpin, who really is a good woman, is shocked to the core of her being. Indeed, in her indignation she really wrestles with her Lord. Why was *she* singled out for this ‘message’ when there were plenty of white-trash and Negroes too in the doctor’s office? But insight seems to come for her when at the end of the story she has a vision which dramatizes explicitly the Christian paradox: the first shall be last and the last first....

Presumably, Mrs. Turpin is on the road to salvation whereas the Mrs. McIntyres and the Mrs. Mays are damned; but these latter ladies don’t even bother to wrestle with their Lord. *They* are ‘warped’ indeed. Closely allied to pride of will in Miss O’Connor’s work is pride of *intellect*, a relationship which reminds one of Hawthorne, as does also Miss O’Connor’s obvious allegorical bent. On her own admission, she felt a stronger affinity with Hawthorne than any other American writer. Both, in a sense, did much of their work in the form of the Christian *apologue*, though Miss O’Connor’s word for it was *tale*. Of no group is she more scornful than the modern intellectuals, particularly those who look on Christianity as merely the paraphernalia of outmoded superstition. This is particularly evident in...‘The Enduring Chill’.”

Robert Drake

Flannery O’Connor

(William B. Eerdmans 1966) 29-30

“Most of the story is seen through the eyes of Mrs. Turpin, another of the ‘good country people’.... O’Connor stays with Mrs. Turpin’s point of view until the end of the story and minutely describes her almost mystical experience as she stands observing the hogs in their enclosure.”

Melvin J. Friedman

The Added Dimension: The Art and Mind of Flannery O’Connor

eds. Friedman and Lewis A. Lawson
(Fordham 1966, 1977) 20-21

“‘Revelation’...shows that Flannery O’Connor believed in justice, not racial justice, as the best way of handling questions of prejudice in the South.... She uses prophecy to bring out her insistence on true charity if races are to live together in peace. Complacent people seem especially to have annoyed Flannery O’Connor. Mrs. Turpin...is such a person. In view of all her virtues, she simply cannot understand how Jesus could let a lunatic girl publicly prophesy to her: ‘Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog.’ Once home, obsessed by the incident, she tries to get rid of her irritation by hosing down the pig parlor, but the sun stares at her out of a fiery sunset, like a farmer inspecting his own hogs.

The dying light takes on the figuration of a path into eternity.... The writer has been underscoring Saint Paul’s warning that the greatest of virtues is charity. Mrs. Turpin’s attitude toward her husband’s Negro employees shows how far she is from practicing charity. What has appeared to her throughout her life to be virtue is really selfishness.”

M. Bernetta Quinn, O.S.F.
“Flannery O’Connor, a Realist of Distances”
The Added Dimension (1966, 1977) 176-77

“Mary Grace’s mother [has a] tendency to offer easy solutions to extremely complex problems. Her problem is of course, Mary Grace, the ugly fat girl in the doctor’s office who attacks Mrs. Turpin, throwing at her a heavy book on *Human Development*, calling her an ‘old wart hog from hell,’ and attempting with great strength and violence to choke her. The girl’s mother is a ‘well-dressed greyhaired lady’ whose first platitude has a cruel relevance to her daughter’s condition... ‘I don’t think it makes a bit of difference what size you are. You just can’t beat a good disposition... It takes all kinds to make the world go round’... That she does not have the charity nor the perception to apply her aphorism to her own daughter’s situation is made obvious when she quite pointedly refers to her daughter’s ill temper.... Her mother’s attempts to force Mary Grace to see her blessings and become the bland, sweet, and gregarious person that the mother believes herself to have been send the girl into a neurotic paroxysm of rage....

Mrs. Turpin...is not an evil woman; she is good and hardworking... Although Mary Grace’s epithet (an ‘old wart hog from hell’) may be shocking and extreme, Mrs. Turpin is nevertheless guilty of appalling satisfaction with herself, whereas the Wellesley girl at least knows that she is ugly and cannot live with the fact. In thanking God that she is who she is, Mrs. Turpin erroneously attributes her expected salvation to her personal identity rather than to her convergent identity in Christ, which entails the loss of the self.... ‘There is finally, no salvation in *works*, whatever form they may take, or in *self*’.... [Robert Drake] In the evening sky she sees that she and Claud are among the saved derelicts such as she saw in the doctor’s office, but that she and her husband are there only because their virtues, and thus their pride, are being burned away’.... There are many O’Connor characters whose behavior is such that the reader accepts, even admires it, only to find that the character’s apparently good qualities are the very ones of which he must be purged.”

Carter W. Martin
The True Country: Themes in the Fiction of Flannery O’Connor
(Vanderbilt 1968) 40-41, 130, 230

“Mrs. Turpin takes the girl’s attack and later denunciation as a sign; she feels that she has been singled out for a ‘message,’ but she cannot understand why she is called an ‘old wart hog from hell’ when there is ‘trash’ there, to whom, she thinks, the ‘message’ might justly have been applied’.... Standing at her farm pig-parlor, she addresses God... ‘Go on,’ she yelled, ‘call me a hog! Call me a hog again. From hell’... Who do you think you are?’... Mrs. Turpin’s ‘message’ has begun the process of upending her values, and the process is completed in the revelation with which the story ends....

‘A vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven.... And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right.’ Mrs. Turpin leans forward to ‘observe them closer’ and discovers that her own kind are ‘marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had

always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior.' She notices that only her kind are singing on key, 'yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.' At the moment of her most violent pride—the challenging question 'Who do you think you are?'—the ironic answer of who she herself is has been provided."

Leon V. Driskell & Joan T. Brittain
The Eternal Crossroads: The Art of Flannery O'Connor
(U Kentucky 1971) 131-32

"Mrs. Turpin, the central character, sits in a doctor's waiting room, protected by her one-hundred-eighty pounds, her pride in being a small landowner, her good disposition, and her sense of decency and goodness. But, despite her insistent contentment, she is not really at ease with herself. Most importantly she is too much bothered by the 'white trash' in the room, too threatened by their laziness and self-possession, too compelled to rehearse her moral and social superiorities over them. She even feels scornful of the doctor's waiting room... The only stranger in the room to whom she feels kinship is a well-dressed gray-haired lady who, with less social insecurity, condescends agreeably to Mrs. Turpin and the white trash.

Furthermore, we find out that when Mrs. Turpin has trouble sleeping, she plays reassuring mental games such as 'naming the classes of people' from colored people and white trash through homeowners to home-and-land owners like herself. Above her are just people with bigger houses and more land, people of her class but with more of the things she has.... Yet even this game cannot completely cover her insecurity.... [The] nightmare image of boxcars and concentration camps appears also in 'A Circle of Fire' and 'The Displaced Person'.... Although Hitler's fascism was horrifying in itself, it has become still more horrifying as a sign that man has not purged himself of the demonic.... Miss O'Connor's allusion to gas ovens...suits the character's bourgeois representativeness. It suggests that no amount of social or psychological insularity can completely protect one from the common nightmares....

In the doctor's office Mrs. Turpin also feels defensive toward Mary Grace, the scowling daughter of the stylish lady. In retreat from the Wellesley girl's obvious dislike, Mrs. Turpin begins a mental counterattack. First, she tries pitying the girl for her acne-scarred face; then, as the girl's scowls turn to smirks, Mrs. Turpin places her among the inferior social orders... Above all, she feels that the girl has a bad disposition, which necessarily makes the girl's judgments unimportant. So, when Mary Grace finally snaps, hits Mrs. Turpin with a copy of *Human Development*, tries to strangle the woman, and says to her, 'Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog,' Mrs. Turpin is psychologically ready to begin her enlightenment, especially since the girl has spoken so pointedly to the situation, telling the pig farmer that even if you wash down a wart hog with a hose every day and keep it in a pig parlor, it is still a wart hog.

The movement from the first shock to the final acceptance and vision is convincingly fitted to the earlier part of the story. Mr. Turpin's repressed hostilities, the signs of insecurity that lay just beneath her good disposition, become more overt. Whereas she once routinely complained about 'buttering up niggers,' she now becomes openly angry at her ingratiating workers, and her previous irritation with the white trash, who have not been given her message, becomes hatred. Throughout, she has scorned anyone who would not show her the admiration she needed; so, now, feeling rejected by God, she begins to attack Him. Her beneficent Jesus has become her enemy, and in her 'concentrated fury' she seems a warrior 'going single-handed, weaponless, into battle.' Without her psychological defenses she must confront a Jesus who is more than a reassuring echo of her self-righteousness; and becoming more and more resentful as she commands Him to justify her treatment, she finally blurts out the hysterical cry, 'Who do you think you are?' At last, she has gone too far to retreat into self-deception; she has revealed things about herself and her faith that she had never realized before....

At this point the earth seems to expand suddenly, so that her husband's truck in the distance looks like a child's toy. She feels alone and vulnerable in a universe too vast to be controlled by her self-serving piety. Throughout her struggle to feel justified while accused, her surroundings have become religiously symbolic. When she returned to her farm, 'she would not have been startled to see a burnt wound between two blackened chimneys.' When she shook the hose with which she was washing down her hogs, 'a watery snake appeared momentarily in the air.' And, above all, infusing everything with its radiance, the sun has been transforming the earth, even suffusing the hogs with a red glow. In the context of this traditional

symbolism, Mrs. Turpin's piety seems more than ever a parody of faith. Cut off from the essence of real love and humility, her feelings for Jesus have been egocentric and sentimental; she has loved a god created in her own image, she must admit her fearful littleness and her dependency on a God who is infinitely more than she is and who cannot be coerced by the cleanliness and grudging charities of his creatures. She is ready for her revelation.

As Mrs. Turpin is left with the quietness and the light of the setting sun, she has a vision of the heavenly bridge on which 'a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven': white trash, niggers, freaks, lunatics, and finally the dignified respectable people whose virtues were being burned away.... The substance of the vision is quite justified by the structure and metaphorical development of the story (compare, for example, the masses of people in the boxcar with the 'vast horde' of the saved) and by the development of the character. Miss O'Connor has achieved the difficult task of showing that grace works through Nature without destroying it and that the acceptance of grace is both an appropriate and a free act."

David Eggenschwiler
The Christian Humanism of Flannery O'Connor
(Wayne State 1972) 41-45

"In this story, the prophet is conceived as one through whom God speaks, as through a mouthpiece. Mary Grace, a fat Wellesley student with acne and obvious emotional problems, becomes a prophet of salvation for Ruby Turpin, a middle-aged, complacent matron.... Mrs. Turpin...cannot dismiss the girl's words as the raving of a mad woman.... When Mr. Turpin mentions that she and Claud have, among other things, 'a few hogs' on their farm, the white-trash woman becomes indignant... 'Nasty stinking things, a-gruntin and a-rootin all over the place.' Mrs. Turpin insists that their hogs live in a pig parlor and implies that they are cleaner than the woman's little boy who is slouched next to her. But the woman persists in her view of hogs as hogs, no matter how swept and garnished the 'parlor' they live in....

Mary Grace's (the single name 'Grace' would have been overly suggestive) message is psychologically linked with the previous conversation which had annoyed her.... 'Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog.' The prophet speaks. Her auditor hears her message and recognizes its supernatural origin. The rest of the story explores Mrs. Turpin's reaction to this message...which parallels that of many biblical figures who heard the prophet's declaration.... The reaction moves from denial to questioning to understanding... The Negroes sitting on her husband's truck echo in their own idiom her evaluation of herself: 'You the sweetest lady I know'... Jesus satisfied with her!' In recognizing the emptiness of their praise she recognizes the falseness of her own self-evaluation....

Becoming enraged at the obvious injustice of the revelation, she roars at the Almighty: 'Who do you think you are?'...The echo of this question is a comment on Mrs. Turpin's entire life. She habitually passes judgment on others: 'Who do you think you are?' To lull herself to sleep, she ranks people in social classes instead of counting sheep.... In the procession of souls on the bridge she sees respectable people like herself and Claud at the end of the line, behind the 'niggers' and 'white-trash' and freaks and lunatics, and she realizes that, as the respectable move toward heaven, even their virtues are being burned away. Natural virtue does as much for fallen men as parlor treatment does for pigs: it does not change their intrinsic nature. Only one thing can change man: his participation in the grace of Redemption."

Kathleen Feeley, S.S.N.D.
Flannery O'Connor: Voice of the Peacock
(Rutgers 1972; Fordham 1982) 151-53

"Miss O'Connor had talents that were constantly improving, and a story as nearly flawless as 'Revelation' (which won a posthumous first prize in the O. Henry competitions) is a poignant testament to a talent thwarted by death.... It is a fable of God's providence operating in a doctor's office and in a pig pen. A triumph of the comic grotesque, the story opens in a doctor's waiting room, where an extraordinary collection of patients who form a miniature society—a ship of fools—awaits examination. Assembled in this almost claustrophobic office are representative diseases of the body, the mind, and the spirit: the

crippled bodies of the aged, the maimed intelligences of the poor and the neuroses of the intellectually gifted, and the defective souls of the self-righteous....

Ruby Turpin, who self-indulgently speculates about the blessings bestowed on her by the Lord, unconsciously turns the story into a punitive fable on arrogance, hypocrisy, and pride. She gradually emerges as a high-toned Christian lady whose sense of social and moral superiority and whose extreme self-absorption and pride border on narcissism.... Mindless of her faults, she establishes herself as a type of white culture heroine, aligned with a pitiful minority against the encroachments of Negroes, poor-white trash, and the baser elements of humanity. Because of her obsessions and her spiritual deformities she is inherently grotesque; her thoughts and her actions reveal her as a negative moral agent, unaware of her own absurdity because she is so attached to an inauthentic existence...

Miss O'Connor plots this story at a pace that is discernibly slower than most of her short fiction [so] that Ruby's unbearable self-righteousness is gradually reinforced to the point of the reader's exasperation. The lack of any physical action, counterpointed by Ruby's constant speculation on the mysteries of creation and by the mechanical conversation of the patients, creates a repressed narrative pace wherein the slightest disruption in movement could have the unusual effect of releasing tensions which lie just beneath the surface of the story. Thus the dramatic escalation which occurs abruptly after Ruby thanks the Lord for having created in her such a fine creature is so unanticipated that the shocking impact creates one of the revelations to which the title of the story alludes. As the Wellesley girl strikes Ruby Turpin in the eye with a hurled book and pounces on her in a frenzy, the astonishing disclosure of the girl's imprecation is not only authoritative in moral terms, but approximates, as perfectly as the literary medium can, the actual force of revelation.

The execration which the girl hurls at Ruby Turpin is both shocking and convincing, for it calls Ruby's self-contained egocentric existence into question. Ruby tries to rebel against this revelation, which in theological terms is a manifestation of God's providence, and which in emotional terms is cathartic. Because of this revelation she becomes an inhabitant of a world which suddenly appears estranged to her. Her initial revelation—that she is, in the girl's words, a wart-hog from hell—is at first incomprehensible and then outrageous, and the remainder of the story traces the process whereby she painfully learns obedience, which is a prerequisite of true faith and of salvation.

Ruby's failure to present a suitable defense of herself shifts from outrage to hatred and bitterness toward God, and the image of this woman marching out to the pig parlour to wage battle with the Lord is a brilliant and hilarious picture of the false believer journeying to meet her apocalypse. Still actively engaged in an attempt to reconstruct the world in her own image, she subsumes any conception of God to her own blueprint, an act that constitutes absolute heresy. This is her central crisis—and the crisis of all of Flannery O'Connor's cultural grotesques: as the landscape transforms itself from the brightness of late afternoon to a deepening and mysterious blue, the reality of this crisis begins to catch up with her.

Ruby Turpin is one of the author's countless grotesques who are largely the creations of themselves. Their own misconception of self and of social laws places them in opposition to a higher justice which assures the ultimate triumph of their opposites—the humble and the meek. Assuredly the lame shall enter first, while the superior citizen, conducting his life for his own sake, shall suffer a humiliation.”

Gilbert H. Muller

Nightmares and Visions: Flannery O'Connor and the Catholic Grotesque
(U Georgia 1972) 46-49, 112

“Revelation is the story of the overthrow of pride... Mrs. Turpin, smug in her bland conviction of personal superiority, confidently places herself near the top of the social and spiritual hierarchy.... She constantly gives thanks to Jesus for his generosity in creating her as *herself* rather than as some less fortunate being.... The door to her mind has long ago swung shut, and no approach short of violence can lead to any revision of her stubbornly held views.... In the doctor's waiting room is assembled a diverse group, forming together a microcosm of society... Mrs. Turpin (Turnip?) at once strikes up a conversation with the other 'lady' present, and they explore together the fascinations of Mrs. Turpin's weight problem,

the Negro question, and the details of farm management.... Mrs. Turpin always concentrates attention on herself, the focal point of the world... Her husband, then, is merely...an extension of her own personality...

The initial revelation—the ugly insult hurled at Mrs. Turpin by the rude young girl—is followed by a second: her own account of her mistreatment to the black laborers who have come in from the field. Although the blacks respond to tones of lavish sympathy, she is left uncomforted. She realizes that the blacks—unlike the Wellesley girl in the doctor’s office—are dutifully saying what they know they are expected to say. The sense in which Mrs. Turpin vainly seeks consolation from the black field hands effectively epitomizes the impossibility of real communications between the races (given the rigidity of the Southern social hierarchy), and also suggests the comic irony implicit in the situation where the white suffers from circumstances which he himself has created....

Mrs. Turpin proceeds to the pigpen... Here, she engages in a wrathful dialogue with God, protesting the injustice of the indictment levied against her... In a final surge of fury, she challenges God: ‘Who do you think you are?’... Mrs. Turpin is at last forced to confront the question of her own self-identity.... Although still apparently unpersuaded on the rational plane, Mrs. Turpin succumbs on a far deeper level. ‘Sometimes ...mystical intuition takes the form of a sudden and ungovernable uprush of knowledge from the depths of personality’.... [This] expresses itself now in a dramatic vision in which Mr. Turpin receives vivid evidence of the errors of her ways.... The revelation that comes to her at last is confirmation of her own insignificance in the spiritual order.... At last, she discovers...humility.”

Dorothy Walters
Flannery O’Connor
(Twayne 1973) 108-112

“The protagonist, Mrs. Turpin, is a good woman whose one shortcoming apparently is that she has constructed an artificial hierarchy of social classes in which she can place anyone she meets. She pities white-trash and Negroes, who are obviously less well off than she is, because they cannot seem to make anything of themselves or do anything with what is given to them. The conflict in the story results from the confrontation of her condescending social philosophy with the revealing word of judgment spoken to her by Mary Grace, who calls her an ‘old wart hog’ and tells her to go back to hell where she came from. Mary Grace, as her name itself suggests, announces the theme of repentance....

Before [Ruby] can accept the judgment leveled against her, she goes through the tortures of a self-righteous Job.... Although Mrs. Turpin tries initially to interpret the word, to remove its sting, she eventually allows it to interpret her, to shatter her illusions of superiority to ‘trashy’ people—the folly of her social condescension based on material possessions... O’Connor has given brilliant contemporary expression to Jesus’ teaching that the first shall be last and the last first....

Despite the onslaught of grace, Ruby begrudges every inch of self she must yield to reevaluation. While taking out her wrath on her pigs with the spray from a hose, she directs her questions with the fury of a latter-day Job at the acknowledged source of the revelation: ‘How am I a hog and me both?’... The answer comes back to Ruby in the form of a double vision. ‘As if through the very heart of mystery,’ she looks down into the pig parlor where the frightened hogs have settled in one corner, seeming ‘to pant with a secret life.’ Then, turning to the sunset, she sees...‘a vast horde of souls...rumbling toward heaven.’ The ‘life-giving knowledge’ that identification with hogs...has brought her is projected onto the sunset. Ruby realizes that the actual order of salvation has nothing to do with possessions...

As she returns to the house, the new vision of reality is firmly planted in her mind... Ruby truly believes now that the first will be last and the last first.... At the end of the story, Ruby is alone, ‘bent’ over the side of her pig pen, staring into the heart of mystery, dwarfed by the cosmic dimensions of the apocalyptic sunset... And the very cause of her pride in possessions—the immaculate pig parlor—suggests a biblical indictment of her as ‘unclean’ of heart’... The [story] emphasizes the relationship between the vision and Ruby’s status as ‘wart hog’ by having her remain at the pig parlor during the revelation and return ‘to the house’ only after the ‘abysmal life-giving knowledge’ has been ‘absorbed’.”

John R. May
The Pruning Word: The Parables of Flannery O’Connor

“One of the revelations in ‘Revelation’ is Mary Grace’s peculiar wrath. As her mother and Mrs. Turpin criticize her, Mary Grace, a fat, pimply girl who never smiles (she got ugly up north at Wellesley), accepts her mother’s remarks politely but grows enraged at Mrs. Turpin. She gets so angry she throws a book at her. But after she hurls it, her very fury makes her crumple to the floor. Her mother bends over her, a doctor sedates her while she clings irresistibly to her mother’s hand.... Mary Grace is too vulnerable, too crippled even to attack her own mother. She attacks her mother’s ‘double,’ Mrs. Turpin, while leaving her own mother alone, much in the way the Misfit claims there was ‘no finer’ woman than his mother, but goes on to murder a woman who suggests to him all the forces of tradition and family and claims he is ‘one of her babies’.”

Josephine Hendin

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

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

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

In this room are all the possibilities of birth and position in the rural South: a well-dressed ‘pleasant’ lady; a thin, worn woman in a cheap cotton dress; another woman in a ‘gritty-looking’ yellow sweatshirt and slacks; a dirty sniveling child; a fat, ugly teenager; and eventually a black messenger boy. Her presence in this company occasions one of Mrs. Turpin’s frequent reflections on the good fortune of her own position in life, and this extends into the question of who she would have chosen to be if she couldn’t have been herself. ‘If Jesus had said to her before he made her, “There’s only two places available to you. You can either be a nigger or white-trash,” what would she have said?’....

Where the woman sees herself as charitable, she is shown to be proud; where she considers herself thoughtful, she is condescending; her solicitousness hides contempt. In terms of both race and class, Mrs. Turpin’s self-satisfaction is gained at the expense of others. Although she does not expose herself directly, she insinuates enough for the Wellesley student to surmise the truth, to assault her physically, and to accuse her of being a wart hog.... The final vision of souls ‘rumbling toward heaven’ is posed in exactly the terms in which Mrs. Turpin has always seen life, as a matter of social hierarchy. But she envisions herself to be last in line; this time in procession behind the white-trash, Negroes, and lunatics, and it is this image that completes the message of ill-founded self-esteem.”

Carol Shloss
“Epiphany”

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

“Confrontations with the literal...are the repeated actions in Flannery O’Connor, and they take place...on borderlines between the city and the country or between day and night. This is why so often O’Connor’s stories end at sunset, as in ‘Revelation,’ when Mrs. Turpin watches her hogs.... From this sight she looks up as the sun goes down and sees her vision of a vast hoard of souls going to heaven, ‘whole

companies of white trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs'....The language is that of Mrs. Turpin, another in O'Connor's succession of good country people. The language informs a rural vision...with a sense of supernatural force so that the whole is seen in a new light. Here again O'Connor creates the *presence* of the supernatural, of mysterious forces beyond the daylight self, in pit and sunset.

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

Ronald Schleifer
"Rural Gothic"

Modern Fiction Studies 28.3 (Autumn 1982)

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

Frederick Asals

Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity
(U Georgia 1982) 99

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The desire to differentiate oneself from those not belonging to one's own 'kind' or class is perhaps no more clearly evident in O'Connor's stories than in 'Revelation.' Just as Sally Poker Sash relies on the General ["A Late Encounter with the enemy"] and the social values his uniform represents and just as the General relies on the group identity of the Confederate Army for a sense of significance, so Ruby Turpin in 'Revelation' derives a sense of self not only from her occupational group but also from her social class, her religious affiliation, and her race.

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

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

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

Mrs. Turpin establishes herself in a select group differentiated from most others to avoid being herself designated as 'common,' but when she contemplates how society ought to be stratified, she finds she cannot maintain a consistent system: 'On the bottom of the heap were most colored people...' Mrs. Turpin needs to maintain rigid racial lines. She objects 'because they [Negroes] got to be right up there with the white folks'.... The preordained roles of the social hierarchy enable Mrs. Turpin to escape an unpleasant sense of fragmentation and insignificance.

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

Mary Grace calls Mrs. Turpin a wart hog from hell, and an ugly reality finally breaks through the light-hearted surface of this story—a surface created by dialogue that stresses the conflict between the inner and outer realities of human personality. The story line vacillates between exterior dialogue (what Mrs. Turpin says to express her 'good woman' projections) and interior monologue, revealing what Mrs. Turpin thinks—nasty belittling thoughts about others. Politeness is countered by meanness. Mrs. Turpin's vision is finally blocked by her inability to be self-aware....

Mrs. Turpin...has not developed herself by relating constructively to others; she dimly perceives that the girl's attack is justified—'that the girl did know her...in some intense and personal way, beyond time and place and condition'—beyond class. This glimmer of recognition indicates that in spite of her faults, Ruby Turpin gains in self-knowledge... She...goes home to contemplate her neat, clean, and decent pig parlor with the knowledge that keeping it clean will not whitewash the self or purify the flesh. Her apocalyptic vision involves the recognition that measures of virtue based on social status are worthless—and that the last shall be the first and the first last, the basic message of the book of 'Revelation,' which closes the Holy Scriptures. At the end of O'Connor's story, Ruby imagines 'a vast horde of souls...rumbling toward heaven,' places herself at the end of that 'procession,' and accepts the fact that we are all are 'just common'—thus relinquishing the notion of being 'singled out' or of achieving anything 'single-handed.'

This recognition allows her to join ‘the immense sweep of creation,’ as O’Connor puts it, and to participate in ‘the evolutionary process.’”

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

Michael Hollister (2014)