

A Good Woman Found

Flannery O'Connor's Catholicism made her the writer she was.

By Chilton Williamson Jr.

FLANNERY O'CONNOR (1925-1964) has been dead now three years longer than she lived. Only several years ago, she was honored by inclusion in the Library of America series, cheek by jowl with Nathaniel Hawthorne, Mark Twain, and Edith Wharton. (On the other hand, also represented in this American pantheon are nonentities like Dawn Powell and James Agee, as well as the atrocious Philip Roth.) The attention perhaps reflects her status during the 1980s and '90s as the center of a literary cottage industry. A great many of the critics engaged in this enterprise were academics, a large number of these academics women, and a significant percentage of the women left-wing feminist and lesbian activists, hungering to establish Flannery O'Connor as one of their sordid own. The industry itself now seems rather played out.

O'Connor's letters, edited by the late Sally Fitzgerald, wife of the Harvard classicist Robert Fitzgerald, were published in 1979. At the time of her death in 2000, Mrs. Fitzgerald was at work on a biography of O'Connor—an early and close friend of the Fitzgeralds—a project that may, or may not, see completion one day at the hands of her daughters. In 1979, John Huston made *Wise Blood*, the earlier of O'Connor's two novels, into a film that was well-received at the time but appears to have resided since, for the most part, in a canister on the back of a shelf somewhere in Hollywood.

Reflecting a brief life plagued by illness and invalidism, the O'Connor oeuvre is meager: the two brief novels of

45,000 words or so apiece, a plump collection of short stories, a slim one of essays, and the hefty volume of letters. Whether this amounts to a reputation for the ages remains to be seen, Library of America or no. Not at all in doubt are Flannery O'Connor's genius, the quality of her prophetic vision—at once luminous and penetrating—her originality as an artist, and her importance both to American letters and the distinguished apologetic tradition of her Catholic faith.

The present effort is intended as a ridiculously brief introduction to Flannery O'Connor and her work, in no way as an authoritative statement about either. (Readers interested in something more are referred to the critical work of two O'Connor scholars, Prof. James O. Tate of Dowling College and Loxley F. Nichols of Loyola University.) I was introduced to Flannery O'Connor by my sister, who in the late '70s was living, on the family farm in rural Vermont, a life that was the New England equivalent, more or less, of Miss O'Connor's on her mother's dairy farm near Milledgeville, Georgia. Images of O'Connor in a garden hat delivering basins of feed to surrounding flocks of flapping peafowl, chickens, and snow geese were sufficient to suggest the affinity Jane felt for this woman, while engaging my own sympathies as well. (Birds, like lions, have always appealed to me imaginatively as active supernatural agents, as well as symbols of the Divine.) It was not, however, through the fiction but rather the letters, published as *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery*

O'Connor, that I first encountered the work itself. They made an impression unsurpassed in scope and impact by any single work I had read before or have looked into since and with the direct result that, 13 years later, I was received into the Roman Catholic Church. The Catholic faith, so rich in two millennia of apologetics, is nowhere better outlined, suggested, and served than in this marvelous book for the introduction it offers to the nature and workings of the Catholic mind behind the formal pattern and structure of Catholic belief.

"I write the way I do because and only because I am a Catholic," O'Connor concedes to one of her correspondents. "I feel that if I were not a Catholic, I would have no reason to write, no reason to see, no reason to feel horrified or even to enjoy anything. ... I have never had the sense that being a Catholic is a limit to the freedom of the writer, but just the reverse. ... I feel myself that being a Catholic has saved me a couple of thousand years in learning to write."

Certainly the Catholic viewpoint was substantially responsible for O'Connor's uncanny ability to see clearly and to recognize the object of vision for exactly what it was. Her penetrating and unflinching gaze has always been too much for tender-minded readers, who typically deplore the grotesque and violent elements of what have often been described as her "Southern Gothic" stories. "... [H]uman kind," T.S. Eliot wrote, "Cannot bear very much reality." Reality of the starkest kind is O'Connor's stock in trade, and she never hesitates to sling

it like hash at a roadside diner. For her, the modern reality is modern man's denial of, or blindness to, supernatural reality—a condition that betrays him all too often into the most horrific experiences, alternating in about equal measure with the most comedic and slapstick situations. For indeed, comedy is the flipside of terror, the one the reverse face of the other. O'Connor could never be so funny were she not so deadly serious, so amusing if she were less "depressing."

"I believe," she insisted, "that the fiction writer's moral sense must coincide with his dramatic sense." That is the dictum of an eminently strong-minded artist. As such, it does not make for easy reading—or easy writing, either. With the novels especially, Flannery O'Connor was always comparatively slow in composition.

The interpenetration of terror and comedy is produced by the conflation of violence and supernatural intervention in a single "action of grace" that provides the resolution for a typical O'Connor story and rescue in the form of revelation for its protagonist. At such climactic moments, the action is ordinarily horrific enough—Hazel Motes's self-blinding in *Wise Blood*; the death of Mr. Guizac under the tractor wheels in "The Displaced Person"—that the comic element in the equation, having been worked up beforehand, has to be modulated in the crisis to irony, as in the homosexual rape of the boy prophet Tarwater following his fatal baptism of Bishop in *The Violent Bear It Away*. But the Holy Ghost has no better preferred instrument than irony, and so O'Connor's reliance on the ironic as an artistic device demonstrates of itself how close she was, both in sympathy and intuition, to the divine *modus operandi*. (God and Evelyn Waugh, another devout Catholic novelist, demonstrated the same synchronicity of spirit in the Deity's delivering sudden death to the great satirist as

he bestrode his toilet on Easter Sunday and Waugh's receiving it that way.)

The most beautiful Old Testament Book in the Catholic Bible is Ecclesiasticus, or The Wisdom of Sirach. Wisdom comes to us through the Word, on which it is dependent. And nothing in the modern era has been more debased, after the Word as Truth, than words as respected elements in the hitherto honored system called language. As modern men dishonor Truth, so they torture the words intended to convey it. Finding humor in the abuse of language, as of Truth itself, is arguably a perverse pleasure. Yet humor, which is the naughty juxtaposition of inappropriately opposed quantities to comic effect, depends for that effect on the fact of some serious subject being at stake—serious for someone, at any rate. We joke, it has been said, only about the most serious things.

In any event, Flannery O'Connor was hardly one to miss the comedic irony inherent in the Georgia dialect as spoken in her day by white-trash Protestants whose illiteracy was matched only by their devotion to what struck her inevitably as a "do-it-yourself religion" and their contempt for the Romish Church they abhorred as "something foreign." So great was her genuine delight in the rural southern vernacular that, in her letters, she frequently indulges her pitch-perfect ear by assuming a white-cracker persona, as if she were a character in one of her own books. For O'Connor's people, words are purely phonetic, imitative, devoid of roots and therefore of determined meaning, and language as arbitrary an affair as, in a conscious way, it is for deconstructionists. They are as ignorant of the reality of language as they are of the reality language signifies.

Ignorance must be one of two things: either it is comical, or else it is terrible. In *Wise Blood*, when the itinerant preacher of the Church Without Christ,

Hazel Motes, sitting dumbstruck in his stopped car in the middle of the highway to read the legend JESUS SAVES painted on a boulder, asks the furious driver of the waiting truck behind him, "Which direction is the zoo in?" the incredulous fellow replies, "Back around the other way. Did you exscape from there?" Here, the violence done to language is pure fun. By contrast, in the serial killer's anti-homily in the presence of the old lady he is about to shoot to death, the metaphysical and syntactical violence both support and reflect one another:

'Jesus was the only One that raised the dead,' The Misfit continued, 'and He shouldn't have done it. If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw everything away and follow Him, and if He didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can—by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness,' he said, and his voice had become almost a snarl.

Again, at other times, abuse of language is a matter of sheer laziness, as when Mr. Shiftlet, in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," describes himself as having served in the "arm forces"—the linguistic equivalent of the mental and moral sloth that leads to religious unbelief or that carelessness with regard to the Divine Existence Pascal thought to be the mark of a monster.

In O'Connor's fiction, the modern duality of comical-terrible is represented in its most extreme form in the person of the self-assured, self-satisfied, and supposedly self-sufficient modern who believes, as the hypocritical Bible salesman in "Good Country People" boasts, "I know which end is up and I wasn't born yesterday and I know where I'm going!" As a variant of this, we have Mr. Shiftlet

again: “The body, lady, is like a house; it don’t go anywhere; but the spirit, lady is like an automobile: always on the move, always...” (Aristotle, who considered metaphor the highest figure of speech, would have been impressed by O’Connor’s metaphoric use of the automobile to signify modern man’s ludicrously inflated sense of his own autonomy, his capacity for outward control as well as for self-mastery and self-direction.)

Flannery O’Connor believed that her characters were either damned by the end of a story or else they were saved: no one, she felt, could be left somewhere in between. One way or the other, their fate was determined by the manner in which they responded to the action of grace extended to them at the crucial moment. Consequently, when the Divine Mercy strikes in an O’Connor story, it typically visits itself upon just such a smug, self-directed, radically autonomous figure who, if humility and grace are sufficient, is blasted like St. Paul on the road to Damascus and has the scales struck from his eyes. This is the “positive” aspect of O’Connor’s work when it manifests itself, as it certainly does not in all of the stories.

Yet the positive for O’Connor is a cold rather than an affective quality, recalling Aquinas’s definition, which she liked to quote, of art as “Reason in making.” O’Connor herself opined that Hazel Motes, at the end of *Wise Blood*, is “probably saved by the skin of his teeth”—which is not the same thing as saying that the novel has a happy ending. In her imaginative world, happy endings, even when implied, are off the page—and, quite literally, out of this world. To the extent that O’Connor was a pessimist, she was pessimistic in the only sense that befits, and indeed describes, a Christian. “You can’t be any poorer than dead,” the stranger’s voice whispers insinuatingly to Tarwater as he prepares to bury his grandfather. Flannery O’Connor, of course, believed

otherwise. She understood that the world as we know it is passing away and that justice and mercy and joy and the Beatific Vision all belong to the world to come. That was enough for her—and a good thing too for a woman who, as she once wrote, had “never been anywhere but sick,” never married, and died of what she

cheerfully described as “a dread disease”—lupus erythematosus—aged 39. ■

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Written by the Losers

Political correctness plays with the past.

By Selwyn Duke

WHILE BEING INTERVIEWED by “60 Minutes” correspondent Mike Wallace recently, movie star Morgan Freeman dismissed Black History Month as “ridiculous” and went on to say, “You’re going to relegate my history to a month? I don’t want a Black History Month. Black history is American history.” He pointed out that there are no white or Jewish history months, and the conviction with which he espoused these views seemed to leave Wallace tongue-tied.

Freeman is correct in his intimation that the proponents of this group history lunacy are treating blacks as a nation unto themselves. We may study Egyptian, Greek, or Chinese history, but we recognize these as separate and discrete civilizations. Likewise, when we shift the focus from American history to black, white, yellow, brown, and red history, the implication is that these groups constitute elements that cannot truly be viewed as part of the fabric of a whole. It is to believe that they are nascent nations within a nation or merely competing factions in a loose federation.

The danger this poses should be obvious. Language, culture, and history bind a nation together and distinguish nations

from each other. We share a continent with Mexico, but we are not one nation with them, chiefly if not solely because of those three factors. Teaching group history sends the message that we are not one people, one nation, but many peoples, currently coexisting within the same borders but always in an uneasy, tenuous union and ever gravitating toward autonomy. The balkanization of history presages the balkanization of America.

As if that weren’t bad enough, there’s another, equally troubling problem with Black History Month, one that’s shared by every other special-interest, group-history scheme. (For example, the National Education Association once voted by a two-to-one margin to make October National Gay and Lesbian History Month.) To wit, it constitutes nothing less than the compiling of history based on quota.

This is the mentality that places obscure figures such as Ida B. Wells and Zitkala-Sa on a list of American heroes, while omitting icons such as Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin. It’s why New York City libraries have a youth-oriented biography of Al Sharpton that lauds the hustler as a man who hails from “long tradition of activist ministers like Martin