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## A Good Man is Easy to Find: Flannery O'Connor's Theology of Death

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### Abstract

The aim of this paper is to describe Flannery O'Connor's stories as the repetition of a pattern that consists in, through sickness, changing good country people into good men. Therefore, sickness, in O'Connor's oeuvre, has to be described as a blessing, an idea that the writer herself would gladly approve of. To prove it, this paper takes into consideration the way O'Connor described the debilitating disease that would end up by killing her. The usual portrait critics make of O'Connor's work consists in randomly applying catchwords like South, Catholic or Grotesque. Contrarily to these critics' description, the somehow systematic approach to O'Connor's stories here proposed does not in any way serve to reduce and simplify the writer's work, but to enhance its mystery and manners. What this paper tries to demonstrate is that, through the analysis of the plot of O'Connor's short stories, we can have access to her personal theology. A theology that, although pictured so ghastly in tales full of rapes, delusions and murders, is profoundly optimistic. O'Connor's aim as a writer is, thence, to prove that redemption and revelations are only dependent of an awareness regarding our own death, an awareness only sickness, in its many forms, can bring.

**Key-words:** O'Connor, Death, Past, Optimism

On a letter to Betty Herster, Flannery O'Connor said she was sure there would never be any biography of her as "lives spent between the house and the chicken yard do not make exciting copy" ("Habit of Being", 290). The lack of interest that O'Connor accurately diagnosed in her own life, however, made the critics of her work reduce it even further, resuming her life and then her stories to three impressive words: Catholic, South and Gothic. After this labeling was done, ninety percent of the critical works written about the Georgian writer were then reduced to a biographical 'connect the dots' exercise. Critical readings of Flannery O'Connor consist mainly in trying to find in the short stories as many traces of southernness, Catholicism and gothicness as possible. In alternative, critics would just paraphrase what Flannery O'Connor had already said about herself in the conferences she had written. What is peculiar is that she wrote these conferences precisely to fight what could be described as puzzle-solving interpretations or, as she would put it, "[the approach of] a story as if it were a research problem" ("Habit of Being", 437).



There would be much to say about this label-approach, as what it suggests is that understanding one's fiction is merely understanding from where this fiction comes from. Saying, for instance, that Tarwater sets his farm on fire because O'Connor is Catholic is exactly the same as saying that Don Quixote dies because Cervantes was Spanish. It is important then to approach Flannery O'Connor's work waving away the Southern-Gothic-Catholic trinity. What this essay will suggest is that, generally, the short stories follow a pattern that could be defined in three steps. Steps we could call: 1) Good Country People 2) Sickness 3) Good People.

There is an obvious contradiction in the proposal stated above. Having started with an attack to critics that reduce the writer's work to three buzzwords, it seems absurd now to attempt an explanation based on three major steps. Furthermore, it would seem bizarre to believe, as both the title of the paper and the last step suggest, in the abundant existence of good people within stories whose main characters are not exactly models of virtue and that typically end with people getting shot, raped or robbed. Furthermore, despite all these tragedies, this paper will argue that these short stories end invariably on an optimistic tone. However, these very reasonable objections will have to be left, for the moment, unattended, in the hope that the ending of the paper will naturally solve them.

On the famous text he has written about Flannery O'Connor, Harold Bloom denies the Trinity I just mentioned, arguing that O'Connor's short stories are not as guided by the Catholic morals as her essays. Bloom states that, while arguing for Catholicism, Flannery O'Connor is building a Gnostic world, taking place in the same cosmological world as *Miss Lonelyhearts*, *The Waste Land* and *As I Lay Dying*. In this article, Bloom seems to be doing the exact opposite of what it was said above regarding O'Connor's critique. However, through Bloom's text we can grasp the kind of misreading this paper aims to challenge. By stating that O'Connor's world is a Gnostic one, Bloom is here neglecting the fact that the landscape of a story is not what the story is. Even though O'Connor recurs to works that are not obviously Catholic to create her own, she is trying to purge that world into salvation. The problem with Bloom's essay becomes evident when he argues that the last scene of "Revelation" "is meant to burn away false or apparent virtues and yet consumes not less than everything" (Bloom, 8). What Bloom fails to see is that, according to O'Connor, her work is an attempt to purge everything by burning everything down. This is exactly what O'Connor is trying to explain when she writes to Betty Herster that "you are more than your history. I don't believe the fundamental nature changes but that it's put to a different use when a conversion occurs" ("Habit of Being", 184).

It is fundamental to stress out that the goal of the explanation that will follow is not to resume and explain completely O'Connor's writing, but simply to try to grasp a pattern that will hopefully allow us to better understand what the writer is trying to create. Therefore, it is necessary firstly to start by explaining in what consists the step called 'Good Country People', an explicit reference to the name of one of her best stories. The early stories of Flannery O'Connor, like 'Geranium', written around the time she was living away from Georgia, are usually about a character that is misplaced. In 'Geranium', like the writer herself, Old Dudley came from the South to live in New



York where he feels homesick. In these stories, the characters believe that there is one place and one time in the past where they belong, which is the place and time from where they come from, a place and time where good people still can be found.

This idea of the South<sup>1</sup> as the place where we fit and where we can find some rest, our promised Babylon, might have forced us to read O'Connor as a nostalgic writer. However, this nostalgia is declared as a fraud in the stories O'Connor will later write, and it cannot be a coincidence that the last story O'Connor wrote, already severely ill, was 'Judgement Day', where she rewrites her first story, 'The Geranium'. In 'Judgement Day', the ideal home Old Dudley kept alluding to becomes an old shack that doesn't even belong to him<sup>2</sup>. It is this fraud that is under attack in many of her stories, with such vitality that we can't help but feel O'Connor is trying to say something more. In "Late Encounter With The Enemy", the glorious past the characters are constantly trying to resurrect is portrayed as a very old fool, toothless and on a wheelchair; a fool that thinks of himself as a General when he had only been a Major. In 'Good Country People', when Manley Pointer shows up in their porch saying he is just a simple country boy that is selling Bibles door to door, both Mrs. Hopewell and Hulga immediately believe he is one of the Good Country People. They share this belief because, in their minds, it is impossible for someone to be a country person without being a good country person; it is impossible for someone that sells a bible not to be a Christian and it is even more impossible to be a Christian without being a good one. What the story will show them is the horrible mistake of that creed.

In 'A Good Man is Hard to Find', while leaving for Florida, John Wesley, the grandson, says: "Let's go through Georgia fast so we won't have to look at it much (...) Tennessee is just a hillbilly dumping ground and Georgia is a lousy state too" ("The Complete Stories", 119). A few pages later, the grandmother, who claims that "people are certainly not nice like they used to be" ("The Complete Stories, 122), will convince the family to go in search of a beautiful old house she remembers *exactly* where it was. This wild goose chase will lead to the death of all the family members. What I believe is that Flannery O'Connor is saying exactly the same thing through two perspectives with the episodes of the grandson and of the grandmother. She is saying that the grandmother is just a grandson that grew old.

The grandson is still young. He believes that his own state and the other state he already knew have no interest whatsoever. Yet, John Wesley is still able to place paradise or, if we want to be less grandiloquent, the Home of The Good People in the future, in the places he hasn't yet visited. The grandmother, similarly, knows that the place she inhabits lacks any interest to her but, as she is now unable to look further for her Paradise anywhere in her vicinities, she will remove the Home of the Good People from the present time, placing it in her youth, which (if it weren't for the episode of the Old House) would have the enormous advantage of being inaccessible. Summing

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<sup>1</sup> The idea of South could easily be replaced by the idea of home, in order to avoid the Trinity mentioned earlier

<sup>2</sup> 'You don't belong here' ("The Complete Stories", 539), he is told, with an obvious biblical connotation



up, there is this erroneous but prevailing initial idea in O'Connor's characters that there is one sect of people, belonging to a very specific time and place that can be defined as Good People, the Good Country People. All the others are up to no good.

There is, however, a changing moment near the end of the stories, which here will be referred to as 'sickness' because it appears as that in "The Enduring Chill" but does not need to be so necessarily. A moment where it is revealed the fragility of characters that up to that moment seem to believe in their absolute invulnerability and omnipotence. In 'The Artificial Nigger', for instance, this 'sickness' is nothing more than the sudden appearance of a figurine; in "Good Country People" it is a prosthesis theft; in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" the appearance of a serial-killer. In this stage of the story, it is introduced an anomaly in the regular life of the main characters that places them face to face with the true state of their lives and forces them to recognize that the description they made of themselves was entirely wrong, not because the diagnosis they make of the banality of the people around them is inaccurate but because, as Bloom failed to see, one can only correct a misguided description by setting fire to it. Because, even though we tend to sympathize with the main characters, they are always in need of a violent blow that sends them in a different direction.

This sickness is always presented as a blessing in the stories because Flannery O'Connor faced her own debilitating illness (lupus) exactly as one. She described it as that when she broke the news to her friend, Robert Lowell, saying "I can with one eye squinted take it all as a blessing" ("The Habit of Being", 57). In another letter to Betty Herster, Flannery O'Connor stated her belief that it was one of God's mercies to be ill before dying. Even when her aunt offered her a trip to the sanctuary of Lourdes, giving her the opportunity to bath herself in the miraculous waters, she wanted not to do that. After being forced to, her disease suffered a considerable retreat that she always refused to face as a miracle, as she never seemed interested in getting rid of her lupus, saying: "I prayed there for the novel I was working on, not for my bones, which I care about less" ("The Habit of Being", 509). Therefore, from O'Connor's perspective, reading the stories as morbid, as horror stories that end badly just because people tend to get drilled by bulls on them is a serious misreading of what is going on. As it would be a mistake reading the stories from the point of view of healthy characters with which we tend to identify, characters still one step away from the revelation that sickness brings.

Sickness is, consequently, the way grace operates to allow, by means of violence, the transfiguration of the idea of Good Country People into Good People. The idea that there is one small sect of people that remain good in the midst of the rottenness of the world is, through sickness, changed into the idea that everyone can be good provided they get sick, provided they get to see exactly who they are and where do they come from.

When Flannery was twelve years-old, she used to, as she confesses in a letter, seclude herself in a locked room and fight, with her fists knocked, her guardian angel. Just like that little Flannery dueling her angel, the characters see the violence that is inherent to the surrendering to God's will



and they try to fight it. This struggle occurs because they understand that surrendering to God's will or, more accurately, surrendering to the truth sickness is trying to reveal is an enormous violence against themselves. These characters spend their lives reacting to the world's banality and will fight the best way they can the understanding that, as Matthew puts it, they also have a speck in their own eyes, that they fit completely in the measure they use to size the world. Like the character that changed her name from Joy to Hulga, in "Good Country People", they are trying to avoid that the world turn their dust into Joy, they are trying to blind themselves so that they do not see the banality of their surroundings.

In "The Artificial Nigger", the grandson had never seen a black person in his life. In the moment he sees one for the first time, he is unable to understand that the person in front of him is, in fact, black, being mocked by his grandfather for that. After telling this episode, Flannery O'Connor says: "He felt that the Negro had deliberately walked down the aisle in order to make a fool of him and he hated him with a fierce raw fresh hate; and also he understood now why his grandfather disliked them [the African Americans]" ("The Complete Stories", 256). In these two lines, Flannery is not only describing perfectly what racism in the South of the United States was in her time; she is explaining exactly why the characters in her stories fight the revelation that is brought by sickness. The kid hates this African-American, just like his grandfather did, because the African-American puts in jeopardy his own conception of the world, putting also in jeopardy the way he describes himself, showing him how little does he know, just like sickness does in all her tales.

There is, therefore, one bizarre optimism that runs through Flannery O'Connor's stories, as what she is constantly reinforcing is not the violence of the South or the cruelty of the gothic world she allegedly built. These things, just like the Gnosticism Bloom alluded to, are only the landscape. She is, on the contrary, repeatedly stating that we are only one violent step away from Grace, one violent step away from becoming good men. We are asleep and unable to see the wrongness of the description we make of ourselves and of others. However, luckily, we can always count on good God to kill us or severely injure us, because, as the grandmother of "A Good Man is Hard to Find", we would all be good if there were always somebody to shoot us every minute of our life.

What Flannery is trying to show us is that we are one Lupus away from, like Bevel in "The River", running to the nearest river and drowning ourselves to find God.

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