

(RE)UNITING “CHRIST-HAUNTED” AND “THE SOUTH”:  
BRINGING ALLEGORY AND CULTURE TOGETHER IN  
FLANNERY O’CONNOR’S CRITICISM

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ABSTRACT. In “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction”, published for the first time in 1960, Flannery O’Connor refers to the South as “Christ-haunted”, a phrase that has become synonymous with interpreting her fiction and ideals. This image has justified everything from psychoanalytic readings to the so-called “Southern Gothic” school of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While O’Connor points to a necessary tie between the culture she observes and at least a superstitious understanding of Christianity, interpretations of her work have mainly fallen into two camps: the theological stream that seeks to read the author as allegorist and ignore the tensions in her work, and the cultural stream, which uses alternative critical lenses to focus on unraveling those tensions, but separate from any redemptive motive. That is, criticism has separated the Christ-haunted narrative from “The South” that O’Connor fictionalizes in her work. This paper argues that the richest interpretation of O’Connor’s texts must leave room for a theological and cultural reading to co-exist, and works to demonstrate that her fiction can both function in the role of parable, through its structure, and invite readings of the cultural and racial tensions at play in the details of each story. This is demonstrated through a close reading of O’Connor’s “Good Country People”. The paper also argues that in joining the two streams of criticism, readership can allow O’Connor’s non-fiction work to hold its own place in the canon—not as decoder, to agree with or fight against, but as writing that contains within it vast cultural and theological complexities of its own.

KEY WORDS: Flannery O’Connor, parable, structure, “moment of grace”, culturalism

**Introduction**

In “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction”, published for the first time in 1960, Flannery O’Connor makes a statement that has become synonymous with interpreting her fiction and ideals: “I think it is safe to say that while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted” (*Mystery and Manners*, 1969: 44). That phrase—the “Christ-haunted South”—has appeared countless times and has justified everything from cultural analysis to psychoanalytic readings to defining the so-called “Southern Gothic” school of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While the author points to a necessary tie between the culture she “feeds on” (*The Habit of Being*, 1979:

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329) and at least a superstitious understanding of Christianity, interpretations of her work have mainly fallen into two camps: the theological stream that seeks to read O'Connor as an allegorist and bleach all other aspects of her work, and the cultural stream, focused on unraveling violence inherent in O'Connor's fiction, separate from any redemptive motive. That is, the Christ-haunted narrative has been separated from "The South" that O'Connor observes and fictionalizes in her work.

O'Connor made no mystery of what she saw as not only her purpose in writing, but the highest calling of fiction: to reveal, to a largely secular readership, humanity's ultimate depravity and need for Christ's redemption. Her stories follow a clear model: protagonists, convinced of their self-sufficiency and social superiority, are confronted by their own pride, often in the form of a rage-filled social outcast. This conflict, which occurs just before the end of the story, strips away the protagonist's arrogant, rebellious veneer and leaves him or her gasping and naked, but with the ability see the true state of their souls and their need for redemption, should they choose to. They begin as caricatures: haughty intellectuals, cliché-spouting optimists, misfits reminiscent of grotesque medieval carvings, but are transformed in an instant into fully realized characters, retroactively as their safe veneers are stripped away. O'Connor, and much of her scholarship, refers to this as the "moment of grace" within each story, but the horrors that shepherd these grace-filled moments have been some of the most widely examined by her critics. Without exception the climax of her characters' lives require a great physical and emotional toll. O'Connor's characters are shot, raped, drowned, stranded, attacked by "lunatics" and gored by bulls. Their farms are burned, their daughters stolen, their parents beaten and left for dead.

Commentary on the violence of this "grace" has made up the vast majority of O'Connor's criticism, both theological and secular. Indeed, even the author herself had a good deal to say about it, explicating her purpose and distancing herself from readings she does not "see" within her own work. She took issue with her frequent classification as a member of the Southern Gothic school, for instance, calling Gothic writing "degeneracy which is not recognized as such" (quoted in Dowell, 1965: 235). She also took pains to differentiate her view of her work from a psychoanalytic reading (an easy lens to read through, given the erratic behavior of her characters). A teasing comment to fellow writer Elizabeth Hester sums up her compromise with Freudian readings and readers: "As to Sigmund, I am against him tooth and toenail, but I am crafty: never deny, seldom confirm, always distinguish. Within his limitations I am ready to admit certain uses for him" (*HB*, 1979: 109). Other critics have claimed O'Connor's violent climaxes as a hatred of women or, in equal measure, as revelatory of the systems of violence

in place against women. O’Connor, again writing to Hester, does not disagree with feminist readings, necessarily, but certainly does not see them as an explanation for her stories, seeming not to understand herself as having a specific agenda one way or another: “I...never think of qualities which are specifically feminine or masculine” (*HB*, 1979: 176).

At this point, a trend, if not a problem, should become clear: because O’Connor has written and spoken so clearly on her own work, critics find themselves considering her opinions closely when analyzing her writing, whether or not their ultimate aim is analysis of her letters and speeches. The first decision when writing on O’Connor tends to be whether or not to agree with her intentions in writing, even though authorial intent has been dismissed in almost all other literary criticism. In fact, in weighing the monstrosity of her stories against the beautiful clarity of a “moment of grace”, many of O’Connor’s critics have allowed her to dictate how her work should be read: not as merely grotesque for its own sake, but as revealing the sinfulness of man in a way that secular readership will recognize as hideous. To show the incomprehensible beauty of grace, she argues—and critics parrot—one must see it outlined against the horrors of sin, and what better way than to show mankind struggling with his own ego in the form of a monstrous physical opponent? In the published form of her widely critiqued essay, “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction”, she writes:

There is something in us, as storytellers and as listeners to stories, that demands the redemptive act, that demands that what falls at least be offered the chance to be restored. The reader of today looks for this motion, and rightly so, but what he has forgotten is the cost of it. His sense of evil is diluted or lacking altogether, and so he has forgotten the price of restoration (O’Connor, 1969: 48).

That is to say, the secular readership she writes for needs a good shock to realize how far mankind has fallen. Sin is hideous, but culture refuses to recognize it as such, unless it looks like a wandering gunman or an atheist Bible salesman taking women’s artificial body parts. This is, in many ways, a credible hermeneutic. It has allowed criticism to interpret her work through several veins of Catholic tradition, including Augustinian and Aquinian thought, and the Medieval fascination with “hideously beautiful” grotesque images (Edmonson, 2002; Han, 1997; DiRenzo, 1995, among others) While I believe that for any kind of full reading of O’Connor’s work one must include, or at least grapple with, the theological element contained within her texts, I disagree that we should grapple with them *because* O’Connor asks us to. To only read O’Connor through her published intentions is not only a fallacy, it also falls short of appreciating the richness (often in the form of tension and duality) that the work has to offer, treating

the fiction as allegory and caricature, but ignoring cultural commentary past the point of establishing a sinful world's need for redemption.

It makes sense that theological readings of the text would look to O'Connor for explanation and affirmation. She provides a clear starting point for such interpretations. But secular understandings of the text also find themselves pulling in biographical explanations and letter analysis to answer O'Connor's critical protestations. As rhetorist James Mellard wryly notes, "Of the modern authors who have had their way with critics, Flannery O'Connor must be among the most successful. [...] [No other author] has been so successful at simply telling the critical readers how they must interpret their works" (James Mellard, 1989: 625). Whether Mellard means this to apply to his own analysis or not, the truth of his lament goes beyond simply noting the vastness of criticism that holds O'Connor up as allegorist.

Of those who refuse to end their interrogation of the texts with the author's own explanation, Mellard included, the two most common ways to examine O'Connor's writing are through a cultural and psychoanalytic lens. Culturally, O'Connor fits alongside the Southern writers who were her contemporaries: William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, even Tennessee Williams and Truman Capote, when Southern Gothicists cast a wide net. Although she's an odd bird even in this flock, her stories deal with race and class in the Jim Crow era and possess the same chilling (and often bitterly funny) quality that the aforementioned draw out when painting the desperation and fear of post-reconstruction Southerners. Because of the rich cultural lens, a psychoanalytic reading can easily be applied, both to individual stories and to trends across stories. If ignoring the theological implications, these lenses makes the most sense as an entry point for analysis. Mellard applies both Freud and Lacan. Claire Katz looks at O'Connor's own psyche for explanation and a few others follow her lead, often digging into her letters or personal history for enlightenment. Louise Westling, moving a little past Katz, takes a feminist approach, picking up on O'Connor's bent toward breathing life into dysfunctional mothers and daughters. Tony Magistrale comments on the fractured family trope as a whole. Still, though, these secularists and others have to wrestle with O'Connor's own reading of her text, explaining it away as too simple, or declaring outright their refusal to be trapped under the author's thumb. And yet, even in these protestations, O'Connor herself, more so than the implications of her framework, is the force being reckoned with.

In this paper, I propose that while the criticism that has come before is thorough and well-examined, it's too disjointed to understand the nature of O'Connor's parable in its most powerful form. I see two camps, which I'll call the theological and secular streams of criticism. Of course there are many smaller veins within these two scholarly rivers and they run the gam-

ut, but the gap I want to comment on exists centrally between those critics who take O'Connor at her word and move forward, using her non-fiction as a basis for interpretation—that is, the theological stream—and those critics who must disprove O'Connor's opinions before they can flesh out another critical lens—that is, the secular stream. The two streams seem at odds with one another, and yet both have to wrestle with the degree to which they accept what O'Connor claims about her work. The theological stream tends to perform close readings of the “grace-moment” in her texts, comparing her with Thomas Aquinas or Augustine of Hippo, using her letters to extricate theological explanations, rarely looking beyond O'Connor's theology to other factors at play within her work. Conversely, those who read her through a lens other than the one she provided want to comment on character motivation and cultural significance, but only look at the climax for clues about the violence intrinsic to each of O'Connor's works. These critics examine literary influence and racial awareness and make arguments about theoretical schools at play, but they have to do heavy lifting to separate these completely from O'Connor's intended moment of grace. Indeed, they must ignore a good bit of the texts in question, or write them off as cultural color.

My argument, then, has two parts: first, that the two streams of criticism have an unnecessary gap that needs to be bridged in order to understand the view of grace being presented. The two camps currently work against each other, to their detriment. By bridging the gap between them, we can see O'Connor's body of work as more than either religious allegory or gory psychoanalytic study of the Gothic South. We can also fit more pieces of criticism in, but give them their rightful place as pieces and not full lenses, an important distinction. This means coupling several different elements, usually treated as disparate: theological and secular readings, structural and naturalistic lenses, eternal views and temporal culture.

The second part of my argument, I think, is the harder case to make: that if we can join these two streams, we can perhaps begin to examine this body of work without the author dogging our steps. Already within this paper, I've referenced O'Connor's explanation of her work four times through quotation. She was nearly as prolific in her writings explaining her work as she was in writing the fiction itself. As such, she has given critics a treasure trove, and it's not wrong to dive in and bring up pearls. But I aim to show that we don't have to. In looking at both the structure of the stories and the details that flesh it out, the reader can discover both a parable-like revelation of grace and a full world situated within a particular culture, influenced by psychological demons, tense family dynamics, and protagonists struggling against systems of injustice. This can only be done by joining the

readings of O'Connor, though. Separately, the two streams need her as their basis, because neither can fully explain her work.

### **O'Connor's Work and Parable Structure**

More than 20 publications on O'Connor from 1980 through the early 2000s deal with the parable-like qualities of her work, specifically noting its salvific goal. While they comment on a wide range of aspects, my focus is on the consistent, parable-like structure of the stories, which allows readership to see O'Connor's purpose without her explicit explanation.

In the preface of his 1871 translation of Aesop's Fables, George Fyler Townsend gives a classic definition of the parable: "the designed use of language purposely intended to convey a hidden and secret meaning other than that contained in the words themselves; and which may or may not bear a special reference to the hearer, or reader" (Townsend, 1871: a2). Thomas Oden adds that to qualify as a parable the story must have an "aesthetic balance, some trenchant elements of metaphorical imagination, brevity and economy, limited development of characterization, and a concentrated plot with a powerful 'twist' or verbal insight" (Oden, 1978: xvi). As a brief allegorical form, born from oral tradition and intended to remind the reader of shared faith, the parable uses simple, clear plot lines and character development, revealing only details that are necessary to unraveling the deeper levels of meaning. In examining Oden's definition, Robert Bullough (2010) puts particular emphasis on the "powerful 'twist'" ending, noting that the function of familiar setting and characters is to "quickly bring readers to the edge of their understanding only to drop them as something new is revealed, requiring that a troubling 'imaginative choice' be made that reveals who and what they are, what they value, and where they stand morally" (Bullough, 2010: 153). Finally, Sally McFague points out that "the outstanding feature of [...] parables is their *extravagance*. While the stories are, at one level, thoroughly ordinary and secular, events occur and decisions are made which are absurd, radical, alien, extreme" (Sally McFague, 1983: 50).

Christ's parables, the best known examples of the form, feature familiar characters, included within his hearers: farmers, tax collectors, Pharisees, a wealthy father and his heirs. They're set in places that a local audience would recognize: an infamously dangerous road between Jerusalem and Jericho, for instance, or the temple courts. In order to serve as reminders of the differences between true faith and self-righteous morality, the parables follow a clear pattern. They introduce a central protagonist and an issue, and then work to a conclusion that upsets the hearers' expectations and bring back into focus the short-sighted and hard-heartedness of mankind, in stark contrast to unabashed mercy. The ends of parables are always ex-

treme. Often, they’re shockingly kind, and hearers can marvel at undeserved grace, especially in place of deserved wrath. Just as frequently, however, they end in utter and violent destruction; five of Matthew’s parables end with characters being thrown into fire or darkness “where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 13:42, 13:50, 22:13, 24:52, and 25:30, New International Version). In both cases, McFague’s noted “extravagance” comes into play, especially as seemingly mundane failures—a servant burying money instead of investing it—are punished with eternal banishment. The hearer is meant to understand, though, that the offense symbolizes direct disobedience to Yahweh, and is therefore more severe than sinful humanity can imagine.

The stories are short and clear, only including details that add significance or layers of meaning to the story, and yet they require unraveling; the deepest meanings are not evident to all hearers, but only to those who will, as O’Connor puts it “undergo the effort needed to understand it” (*M&M*, 1969: 189). Much of Christ’s teaching is spent explaining his parables to his disciples.

Similarly, O’Connor’s stories frequently contain references to Southern-American Christian morality, such as Ruby Turpin’s Pharasaical prayer thanking God that she was not born “white trash” (“Revelation”), and moments of true Christian conviction, such as the grandmother’s exhortation to the Misfit to “pray, pray, pray,” just before her death in “A Good Man is Hard to Find” or the vision of Jacob’s ladder at the end of “Revelation”. It would be reductionist to say merely that the stories *are* parables, but they certainly serve similar purposes through like means. One could argue that O’Connor’s characters—brightly painted with cabbage heads and potato noses—can be read as stock-types for most of the story, as much on display for the reader’s amusement and education as the hermaphrodite in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost”. The setting, also feels familiar, set specifically amongst O’Connor’s neighbors. It’s in no way a stretch to say that the stories draw from Southern story-telling traditions; both florid characters and sharp language points to oral tradition and “local color” writing—in the style of earlier writers and storytellers like Mark Twain.

To demonstrate the extent to which O’Connor’s work can be read as a parable, I want to apply parabolic parameters to one of O’Connor’s most successful and widely anthologized stories, “Good Country People”. The story’s “aesthetic balance” comes from several contrasting elements. The use of Mrs. Freeman’s limited perspective, which bookends the story, creates a tension between characters’ “mechanical” functioning and genuine experience. Physical descriptions, such as “big spectacled” Joy-Hulga Hopewell in contrast to “tall gaunt” Manly Pointer, act as balancing forces. The use of physical location as a disorientating force, conversely, acts as a reverse aes-

thetic, and, within the narrative, breaks down Hulga's safe, self-contained worldview and, with it, readerly assumptions about human nature. As for characterization, the story portrays four of O'Connor's most frequent stock characters: a cliché-spouting, optimistic Southern matriarch, a poor, steely farm wife, an intellectual, embittered daughter, and a cruel interruption in the form of a wandering trickster. Each of these types appears elsewhere in O'Connor's work, and so is familiar to her readership. The characters also pull in mythic elements: the sweet but steely Southern matriarch and the traveling conman particularly are common characters who serve as signposts for a Southern audience.

The story follows a classic arc, both in O'Connor's cannon and parabolic forms: Joy, thirty-two, miserable, unmarried but possessing "many degrees", lives at home because of her prosthetic leg and a chronic illness. Having declared herself an atheist, and renamed herself "Hulga" to spit in the face of her mother's desire to clothe hardship in a cheerful veneer, Joy-Hulga becomes enamored with a young man who comes to their home peddling Bibles, both because he shows interest in her and because she sees him as simple and honest—"the salt of the earth" (O'Connor, 1971: 279). After he kisses her, she agrees to a secret rendezvous. Nervous, but seemingly assured of her worldliness and ability to keep herself aloof, Joy-Hulga leads the young man to a hayloft and, in time, shows him how to remove her false leg. In a horrific twist, he takes both her glasses and her prosthetic, leaving her stranded. As he leaves, he tells her "you ain't so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!" (O'Connor, 1971: 291)

The twist that Bulloughs and Oden emphasize serves to hint at the story's "secret meaning." As an extravagant upset, the twist is doubly cruel: first, despite Hulga's belief that she is mentally and emotionally above seduction, shame, or supernatural belief, she *is* seduced into removing her leg, leaving her both vulnerable and humiliated. Second, Hulga is seduced by the idea that this seemingly honest young man, perhaps because she sees him as innocent and simple, sees her as unique and interesting—which not only appeals to her pride (the egoism so often stamped out in O'Connor's tales), but also confirms her worth, perhaps for the first time. That sense of self is thrown into jeopardy when Pointer leaves, spitting her name "as though he didn't think much of it." When the text leaves the protagonist suddenly stranded, without sight or mobility, the reader becomes disoriented, too. The physical extremity of the situation forces the reader to ask deeper questions—if security and sense of self can't come from conquering emotion, what can keep us safe?

As in the parables she emulates, of course, O'Connor's twist ending ultimately points to the overthrow of selfish ambition and the grace of the cross. The hayloft is a suiting place for Hulga's humiliation—given the

humble beginnings of the God-Man she wants to be rid of. Salvation is not found in “good country people”, or in “many degrees”, or in “looking through to nothingness”, but at a disorienting crossroads when vision and wiles and physical strength fail.

The underlying meaning comes as no surprise for those familiar with O’Connor’s work and beliefs. But is it possible to uncover that based only on the structure itself? To see the story as parable without separately knowing the author’s explanation? O’Connor does not seem to think so, writing:

Many of my ardent admirers would be roundly shocked and disturbed if they realized that everything I believe is thoroughly moral, thoroughly Catholic, and that it is these beliefs that give my work its chief characteristics (*HB*, 1979: 147-8).

Critics such as Laurel Nesbitt (1997) agree with O’Connor in this at least—the social commentary is so clear that theological aspects do not necessarily reveal themselves to those who are not already expecting them. Nesbitt writes, “[R]eaders are perhaps embarrassed, after reading some of the criticism, to acknowledge what they have missed in the stories.” Likely, this has a lot to do with O’Connor’s choice to write extensively about her own work.

I think though, that if we’re paying attention to both literary structure and to the details of the story itself, the shadow of the Cross, at least, peeks through. “Good Country People” wrestles outright with the tension between cultural morality and atheism before declaring both worldviews unsatisfactory, but it does so through juxtaposing characters that embody those hermeneutics, namely Mrs. Hopewell and Joy-Hulga. Manley Pointer appears as a phantasm of their beliefs—for the mother, he is “boring but so genuine”; for the daughter, he’s a “poor baby”, in need of her disillusionment (*CS*, 1971: 282, 287). His disappearance casts Joy-Hulga, at least, into temporary chaos, but with the hope that this is *not* the end of the parable, that she can be saved from eternal “weeping and gnashing of teeth”. While the themes are not always so explicit, the pattern remains constant throughout O’Connor’s work. Thus, the form itself, which balances worldviews before destroying them and ends in a gesture toward the model it draws from, hints heavily at the grace at work even without O’Connor’s explicit revelations.

And yet, critical readers of O’Connor’s text should continue to feel uneasy here. Thus far, our analysis has outlined character and form, looked at aesthetic balance and intentional disorientation, noted the clear moral laid out for us, but stopped just short of actually interrogating the specific tensions at work within the text. Because of O’Connor’s care in creating characters and dialogue, the tensions outside of the cut-and-dry story arc are many, and they clamor not to be ignored.

### Ways of Joining Structure and Culture

While reading O'Connor as theological parable has, for decades of criticism, provided a full hermeneutic of her work (and one that she would be pleased with, as she was constantly correcting "misreadings" in letters and essays), treating her work as an open and shut allegory meant to illuminate transcendent truths is problematic for a number of reasons. Readership can certainly look at the structure and characters on display and parse out the deeper meanings, both for current readers and for the culture surrounding the author. As Claire Kahane has noted, however, "O'Connor was very much a Southerner as well as a Catholic" (Kahane, 1978: 183). This should be read as "O'Connor was very much culturally shaped as well as theologically motivated," or "her focus was eternal, but her mindset and writing habits were still a product of temporal surroundings." Earlier attempts to join theological and cultural readings have attempted to point out that O'Connor writes as she does because she "obviously loves her neighbor", that she is concerned with the highest form of social justice: eternal redemption and equality under Christ (Gertlund, 1987: 198). The problem with this reading is that, while it focuses on high purpose, it cuts off any kind of culturalist reading that sees O'Connor's work as a product of rural 1950s Georgia. Kahane and others have noted the problem with constructing black figures, specifically, as symbols for white protagonists to look on and feel the need for grace. If we carry the problem to its furthest extremity, not only minority figures, but all of O'Connor's characters become miserable, grotesque warnings against egoism. Rather than round and dynamic, capable of change, they remain flat, one-dimensional symbols.

Instead, I suggest that a duality must exist in the reading: stories can be read as allegories pointing to higher truth, and *yet* as viciously funny, socially satirical, sometimes problematic, products of their culture. Again, "Good Country People", holds within it a perfect example of this duality.

The shape of the story, is, as I've noted previously, brief and clear, with a strong emphasis on plot and familiar, if exaggerated, characters that fit naturally into reader's expectations of rural Southern life. It has the structure of a parable with the aim of leaving both characters and readers looking for a higher truth and sense of security than they had previously realized they needed. But leaving the story after calling it a parable is awkward for a few reasons. First, and most simply, it doesn't quite fit the requirements. Thomas Oden notes that a parable must be memorable, and "Good Country People", like most of O'Connor's stories, certainly is. But it doesn't, as Oden continues, "lend itself to oral retelling" (Oden, 1978: xvi). It's not an oral tale—it's written, and in the summarized retelling, much gets lost. This may seem obvious, and thus not worth mentioning, but it's actually crucial. A major point in creating a re-tellable tale is its "detachability from

the original context”, its layers of meaning for many cultures and periods, separate from the time and culture of its original telling. Oden goes on to exemplify the point: “If, before telling or commenting upon the parable of the prodigal son, one were required to place it in its original historical context, the parable would seldom be told or remembered.” To that end, in the case of true parables, the story is simple and unadorned. Characters are identified as “a farmer” or “the younger son”, and given no physical description so that they could represent any of a number of listeners throughout time and history. They possess no history but the actions they are given within the context of story. Based simply on character and plot, the prodigal son might have fit medieval Europe or the nineteenth century United States as much as first century Israel, even given the disparity between these cultures. O’Connor’s characters, on the other hand, while easily identifiable by type, are not multi-cultural. They are familiar, and begin as caricatured stock-types, but they have dimension—history, opinions, facial expressions, frustrations—that exist outside of the realm of story, something that truly parabolic characters cannot have. They also possess the mindsets of post-Reconstruction Southerners, and thus represent temporal social fears as much as ageless bad theology. They are, in fact, stuck in their culture, and therefore must serve as social commentary for their immediate surroundings as well as eternal warnings.

The second issue with ceasing interpretation after finding a parable-like structure, is that it cuts off further interpretation of the story from any lens other than theology, weakening any interpretation of the story, even a redemptive interpretation. Nesbitt, Kahane, and others rightly mourn early attempts to couple theological and cultural readings that treat temporal social aspects within the text as inconsequential for the sake creating a whole theological reading. As Fredrick Crews (1990) admonishes readers: “Even the Christians among us, I should think, must feel the shortcomings of a perspective that narrows all social problems to the abiding question of whether an individual can believe that Jesus died for his sake” (quoted in Nesbitt, 1997). This is not to diminish the stories’ eternal focus, but rather to point to the problem of critical oversimplification, which tends to elevate theologically-focused texts in vogue if not to the level of gospel commentary, at least to that of a Sunday sermon—interpretation for a world in peril, separate from the snares of cultural belief and shortcoming.

While important to investigate, to avoid translating cruelty merely into benign symbolism, I do not here wish to work through Claire Kahane or Patricia Yeager’s claims that O’Connor’s treatment of her characters is “sadistic”. I do not even wish to begin untangling the layers of racial and social tension woven into the fabric of each of her stories. Readership must acknowledge that those elements exist and that to ignore them or explain

them away through suggesting a “greater good”, is to belittle the experience of a region and culture still struggling against such oppressions. Many critics, though, have labored to help such realizations come to fruition and many more after me will continue to do so. For my purpose, then, I want to return to the idea that to read O’Connor’s work as merely a theological exploration not only hinders social and cultural work, it also weakens the theological reading, because it posits that racial, social, and gendered tensions, even in the form of extreme violence, *must* fit into a bland, theologically-sound package, and must be explained away as nothing more than “symbol” in order for the stories to hit their mark. In fact, while O’Connor’s language and wit create a nice balance between humor and horror, theological implications and cultural mindsets, there are many elements that seem incongruous, and the play between them is makes the work interesting and complicated.

### **Reading O’Connor as Author, Not Interpreter**

It seems obvious to point out the levels of tension in “Good Country People” that go unmentioned and unsolved within the world of the story, but a quick examination does a lot toward underlining my larger point. Within the story, characters must wrestle with a patriarchal system, which punishes Joy-Hulga for her sullenness and intellect, and Mrs. Hopewell for usurping her ex-husband’s place as head of house, but allows Pointer to physically assault Joy and escape unscathed; an economic system that keeps landowners and tenant farmers dependent on one another, but does not allow them to fully trust one another; and a class system in which poor fifteen-year-old girls are labeled “proper young ladies” after they’ve married and had children. Within the story, even from the title, these tensions are present, but go wholly unresolved and nearly unmentioned, merely hinted at in conversation and offhand narrative comments. Only Mrs. Freeman’s closing comment—“Some people can’t be that simple. I know I never could”—addresses the uneasiness of her position (*CS*, 1971: 291). Why include such details if the purpose of the story is a didactic exercise in receiving true grace?

I posit that what O’Connor has created in her stories is a hyper-tense, concentrated vision of her own culture in parable form—one in which tensions that ordinarily boil under the surface instead come to a head by the end of the work. Rather than whitewashing tense topics with a belief about the greatest good, grace is dropped into a Technicolor hyper-reality, and, is both the catalyst for ultimate social destruction, and a strangely personal force. It effects only the individual(s) that it touches. In “Good Country People”, Joy-Hulga’s sense of security is devastated. Post-story, her mother’s worldview might also be affected. The Freemans, on the other hand, likely

remain untouched and continue under the social and economic tensions that the story began with. Furthermore, while grace comes to the individual and offers a changed view of self, the systems of oppression he or she suffers under remain. The mystery of grace is that it co-exists with social horror, that it is given personally, that it has the power to, but often does not, solve systematic ills.

If we look to O'Connor for interpretation, we see numerous comments on portraying horror as an agent for grace—thus seeming to reveal a theological reading at the expense of the uglier aspects of her fiction. She also, though, writes about her compassion for her characters, expresses her own feelings of being at odds culturally in rural Georgia (and at literary gatherings as well), and contradicts her social and racial beliefs throughout her non-fiction work. That has baffled critics, and led to many an article-length debate painting O'Connor as a revolutionary or a racist villain. I must confess, though, I remain unsure as to *why*. Not so different from her fiction, O'Connor's letters and talks exist in a world of contradictions: cultural artifacts that move between expressing higher truth and commenting on a temporal writer's observations. In this way, O'Connor is of course contradictory. It would be easy to come on the side of theology and say that O'Connor means to represent redemption and grace and thus everything else falls under that all-important heading, but that's a poor reading of the text itself. Too much else exists within her fiction—psychological oddities and violent upheavals, yes, but also offhand comments, and poignantly tense moments. It would be nearly as easy, then, to ignore the theological symbolism and write it off as familiar cultural signposts, and instead to argue with O'Connor about her place in culture, plotting her point on the spectrum between traditional and radical in any number of movements. This has been done, and will continue in circles of O'Connor criticism. Without seeing the climax of each story as a “moment of grace”, however, the fiction becomes nothing short of nihilism: acts of violence for the sake of violence, repeated again and again throughout two novels and two books of short stories. Perhaps that's a reading that should be pursued, but if read this way the reader must at least recognize that the pattern within O'Connor's work is one of her chief defining characteristics—if the point of the story is not to bring an individual to the end of self-satisfaction and the beginning of redemptive work, the reader must find another purpose underlying this pattern. Thus, former criticism has found itself needing to turn O'Connor's words back on their author instead before getting to the real work of examining the work itself.

### Conclusions

In working toward an interpretive model that couples the theological and cultural streams without glancing backward at O'Connor's non-fiction, then, we must first be willing to examine O'Connor's work as complex and contradictory: the workings of a white, Catholic, Southern woman observing and representing cultural tensions, producing artifacts of that both represent and question her upbringing, and one assumes, working through her own salvation with fear and trembling. What makes both her fiction and non-fiction interesting is the interplay between conflicting attitudes and beliefs, the balance between eternal focus and temporal situations. We also must acknowledge that, while rich, O'Connor's commentary wants to focus centrally on the correct interpretation of grace within the lives of her characters. This is separate from her feelings on society, gender, and race, and the author seems to have wanted to excuse herself from those realms. After all, as she writes to Maryat Lee, when asked to meet James Baldwin in Georgia, "I observe the traditions of the society I feed on—it's only fair" (*HB*, 1979: 329). That is, she wants to describe the culture she sees for the sake of revealing higher truth. This is the best reason for looking outside of O'Connor's letters and essays for interpretation—the cultural issues still beg to be worked through, and because they exist alongside and throughout the parabolic narrative, they must be examined as together. Interpreting "baser" truths, O'Connor leaves to her readership. We should let her. Ultimately, these cultural inconsistencies point, as much as any grand "grace moment", to the need for real redemption, even without O'Connor's post-parable interpretation.

Note: References to O'Connor's work abbreviate titles as *Habit of Being* (*HB*), *Mystery and Manners* (*MM*), *The Complete Stories* (*CS*).

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