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FLANNERY O'CONNOR: PROPHET AND EVANGELIST

by

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A Thesis Submitted to  
the Faculty of the Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

Greensboro  
August, 1966

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7411

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Flannery O'Connor is a Roman Catholic who believes that the Christian who would create art today can do so only by making his moral judgment a part of his act of seeing and recording. Thus her work is essentially Christian art and must be judged as such if it is to be understood in all its depth and complexity. It is my aim in this paper to establish the relationship of religion to art in Miss O'Connor's work, and I attempt to accomplish my purpose through the detailed explication of three representative short stories.

The stories combine a macabre Gothic surface actuality with a statement of truth as Miss O'Connor sees it. The central O'Connor theme is displacement: man has lost his proper place in the universe through his rejection of the scheme of redemption offered by God. In "The Displaced Person," Miss O'Connor describes the life and death of a Polish D. P. in rural Georgia to show that man's self-displacement leads through the displacement of God to the evil of indifference to human suffering. "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" considers modern man's search for identity and concludes that the search must be futile when man places his faith in human reason rather than divine love. "Greenleaf" is a story based on Greek fertility myths which tells of a displaced God who, as an intruder on the human scene, reclaims man for Himself in violent but conclusive acts of ritual sacrifice and salvation.

The stories are put together with the economy and compression one associates with poetry and they are mysteriously powerful on the literal level. I feel that Miss O'Connor does what she sets out to do and that the stories' success depends on the way the underlying moral vision illuminates the fictional landscape she creates with her artist's imagination.

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## CHAPTER I

### THE CHRISTIAN WRITER IN THE POST-CHRISTIAN WORLD

"If it were only a symbol I'd say to hell with it."<sup>1</sup> Flannery O'Connor's opinion of the significance of the Eucharistic bread and wine makes a trenchant statement of that orthodox Christianity which cannot be separated from the artistry of her fiction. Critical recognition of the Christian view informing Miss O'Connor's work is now virtually universal, but the knowledge has proved less useful than one might suppose and seemingly unnecessary interpretive problems continue to arise.

Pauline Parker believes she has identified a source of recent critical misinterpretation of the work of another Christian artist, Edmund Spenser, in the common assumption that Western civilization is essentially Judeo-Christian today as it has been in the past. To her, this appears to be an oversimplified assessment of the present situation, falsely presupposing a universal understanding of "an intellectual system and a mental background which though it still exists and is still operative . . . is unfamiliar to a large and ever increasing number of persons."<sup>2</sup> She theorizes that Spenser is frequently misread by those outside the Judeo-Christian ethic who, being part of a

<sup>1</sup>Quoted by Robert Fitzgerald in his introduction to Flannery O'Connor, Everything That Rises Must Converge (New York, 1965), p. xiii. Citations from this book in the text will abbreviate the title as ETR.

<sup>2</sup>The Allegory of the Faery Queen (Oxford, 1960), p. 2.

common culture, assume that they understand Christianity when in fact they know little or nothing about it. Miss O'Connor seems to suffer the same fate for the same reason, with violence done to her fiction by both scholarly critics and popular reviewers. Seeing her work as Christian art, critics quite correctly feel that it must be interpreted with reference to its moral statement, but they often praise or damn it for Christian elements of their own invention.

To take a recent example, Naomi Bliven, reviewing Miss O'Connor's posthumously published collection of short stories, Everything That Rises Must Converge, for The New Yorker, says that "her prose seems to accelerate as she propels her sinners toward destruction,"<sup>3</sup> and adds that "the severity of Miss O'Connor's judgments and the terrible punishments she awards her characters . . . seem to me marks of youthfulness, for the young are usually stern and disinclined to forgive such mediocre sins as hypocrisy and smugness."<sup>4</sup> Miss Bliven's conclusions evidently derive from her own ideas of the nature of Flannery O'Connor's Christianity, because they do not relate to what the stories themselves say. From these, one can tell that their author believes in original sin but, beyond her premise that man is sinful by nature, she does not make judgments; she simply sets her characters in motion and they act out their lives as they must, being what they are.

In the same way, Irving Howe, in what is otherwise a sensitive and intelligent review of the same book, does not appear to recognize the

<sup>3</sup>"Nothing But the Truth," New Yorker, Sept. 11, 1965, p. 220.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 221.

nature of Miss O'Connor's Christian viewpoint, attributing to her a value system no serious orthodox Christian could accept. Discussing the book's title story, he remarks that "repeatedly she associates the values she respects with an especially obnoxious kind of youthful callowness, while reserving some final wisdom of experience for the foolish and obtuse, the unbearable parents."<sup>5</sup> Like Miss Bliven, he reaches conclusions which are not based on what is in the stories. There both young and old are recipients of grace, though it comes to them in different ways. As products of different generations, they have been shaped by different forces and need different kinds of knowledge.

Differences in the beliefs of reader and writer should create no interpretive problems in work that has intrinsic artistic merit if the differences are acknowledged. The reader who finds no difficulty in Oedipus Rex should find none in Everything That Rises. However, he must look at Miss O'Connor's fiction with the same critical recognition of the particular frame of reference within which it operates that he gives to Sophocles' plays. It is the purpose of this paper to establish the nature of Miss O'Connor's fictional house of values and, having determined the properties of the materials she uses, to examine several of her stories as individual works of art in order to reach conclusions about the place her religious position must take in an overall evaluation of her artistic achievement.

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It is important to know that Miss O'Connor never considers her-

<sup>5</sup>"Flannery O'Connor's Stories," New York Review of Books, Sept. 30, 1965, p. 16.

self a Catholic writer in the sense that she writes for an audience of fellow Roman Catholics or fellow Christians. She sees herself as an artist who writes for herself, and she knows that her work must attract its readers through artistic value alone. She is realist enough to see that most of these readers will be people who do not share her religious views, and she has discussed this special problem of the Christian artist in the post-Christian world in two essays.<sup>6</sup> In discussing their own work, many writers reveal that unconscious motivations play an important part in their creativity, and that aim and achievement bear little relationship to each other. In Flannery O'Connor's case, however, purpose and result seem to be logically connected, and she always appears to have conscious control of her stories. Therefore I feel that it is not only possible but important to bring her critical statements into a discussion which attempts to determine the importance of her religiosity in the overall pattern of her work.

In America, Miss O'Connor speaks of Henry James's idea that the morality of any work of fiction will ultimately depend on the amount of felt life that it is able to convey. She agrees with James and makes the point that the Catholic writer, insofar as he is a Catholic, must feel life and convey it from the standpoint of what she terms the central Christian mystery. That is, that life has, "for all its horror, been found by God to be worth dying for" (A 733). The Incarnation establishes the value of all human life for her beyond any question,

<sup>6</sup>"The Church and the Fiction Writer," America, XCVI (1957), 733-735, and "The Fiction Writer and His Country," The Living Novel, ed. Granville Hicks (New York, 1957), pp. 157-165. Future references in the text to these articles will be abbreviated A and LN respectively.

giving meaning to all human behavior and focus to all Christian thinking, but it also presents a problem to the contemporary Christian artist who wishes to reach beyond the limited circle of his co-religionists. He automatically finds himself writing for an audience certainly unsympathetic and quite possibly hostile to his world view. But great fiction, she argues, can be created only when a writer's moral sense coincides with his dramatic sense to create life, and for her there is "no way for it to do this unless his moral judgment is part of the very act of seeing" (LN 161). Thus there is no possibility of abandoning the Christian viewpoint, but she is careful to point out that the Christian artist must never allow his moral position to interfere with the clarity of his vision. "A belief in fixed dogma cannot fix what goes on in life or blind the believer to it" (A 734), and the fiction writer who is Christian, like the one who is not, "will discover, if he discovers anything at all, that he himself cannot move or mold reality in the interests of abstract truth . . . What is is all he has to do with; the concrete is his medium, and he will realize eventually that fiction can transcend its limitations only by staying within them" (A 733).

Miss O'Connor disagrees with those who insist that loyalty to the authority of the Church denies her the freedom to be a creative artist; instead it makes special demands on her. As she puts it, "When people have told me that because I am a Catholic I cannot be an artist, I have had to reply, rather ruefully, that because I am a Catholic I cannot afford to be less than an artist" (A 734). If the Christian is also an artist his Christian convictions should erect no bar-

rier between him and his reader. In her words,

Belief will add to the writer's observation a dimension which many cannot, in conscience, acknowledge; but as long as what they can acknowledge is present in the work they cannot claim that any freedom has been denied the artist. A dimension taken away is one thing; a dimension added is another, and what the Catholic writer . . . will have to remember is that the reality of the added dimension will be judged in a work of fiction by the truthfulness and wholeness of the literal level of the natural events presented.

A 734

My discussion here and all but one of the direct quotations in these paragraphs are from the article appearing in a leading Catholic periodical. However, the other article, written for a symposium on fiction writing in the United States, and appearing at about the same time, says much the same thing. Both were published in 1957, and since that time much of the interpretation of Miss O'Connor's work shows evidence that scholars are familiar with one or both of these critical pieces. As a result Catholic criticism has become less parochial, but confusion persists in lay circles because of that lack of understanding of Christianity to which I have already alluded. It seems wise, therefore, to preface the discussion of individual stories with a concise statement of the major points of Christian belief which are reflected in Miss O'Connor's work.

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My account is based on two sources,<sup>7</sup> one Roman Catholic and the other Protestant, which I have judged the most valuable among the

<sup>7</sup>The Church Teaches: Documents of the Church in English Translation, ed. John F. Clarkson, S. J. (St. Louis, 1957), and Hendrik Kraemer, "The Christian Faith and the Christian Ethic," in his Christian Message in a Non-Christian World (New York, 1938), pp. 61-101. Future references in the text will be abbreviated Clarkson and Kraemer.

materials available to me. I feel justified in using Protestant references as well as Roman Catholic ones because evidence in the stories themselves indicates that Miss O'Connor is determined not to compound her problems of audience appeal by incorporating points of doctrine which would be acceptable only to the Christian who is also a Roman Catholic.

Perhaps what makes Christian orthodoxy hard for modern non-Christians to understand is the relationship of man to God which it establishes. The self is not the central point of reference; God is. As one Catholic spokesman says, "The believer's God is not the God of the philosophers but the Being to whom everything must be referred."<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, He is a hidden God who is known to man only through the revelation of His son, Jesus Christ, whose dual nature introduces another difficulty. To the Church, this Christ is both "true God and true man . . . God, begotten of the substance of the Father before time; and . . . man, born of the substance of his mother" (Clarkson 92), functioning in conventional Christian theology in a complex way.

He is the perfect human, subject to all the limitations and temptations of the human mind and body, transcending them only through a perfect communion with God which is possible because he was conceived without taint of original sin. His presence in human history, His passion and death, were dictated by man's so-called fall from grace which, in another vocabulary, is spoken of as man's "willful maintenance of self" (Kraemer 75). In the Christian view, self-will diverts man from

<sup>8</sup>Pierre Emmanuel, "The Vocation of the Writer," Commonweal, LVI (1952), 295.

his true spiritual center -- God -- destroying the balance of all his relationships by recreating his spiritual center within himself. A false sense of self-importance sets limits to what he can see and feel, making wholeness impossible. As a result, everything human exists in a state of partiality in which good is mixed with evil.

In the face of this stubborn selfhood, Christ comes as God to provide the means for man's reconciliation with his Father. Assuming human form, He suffers as a god, taking unto Himself all human sins and providing the mechanism for divine forgiveness. The Incarnation, as the central Christian mystery, is important because the superimposition of a Christology on the Judaic concept of God introduces a new idea of what God is. The old God of judgment and wrath recedes before the newly dominant figure symbolizing mercy and love, whose coming reveals to man the new idea that God's will is love. However, Christ's human life and divine death signal no improvement in human society because the nature of man remains unchanged. The risen Christ is man's constant reminder of his need for God and of God's presence and His love. He is the ideal reference point toward which the Christian reaches in his efforts to escape the tyranny of self.

Christ's coming is important in orthodox theology because it alters the face of the divine kingdom, extending it to include man in a radically new way. The Christian world -- which is the country of Flannery O'Connor's stories -- is a strange and unfamiliar place, existing partly in the natural world and partly in an invisible absolute (Clarkson 116). The portion which man may comprehend exists in two senses. First, it is the visible Church and second, it is the

whole human race -- all the children of God. In both meanings it is part of the larger whole made accessible to imperfect man through the love, mercy, and forgiveness offered by Christ. The kingdom, then, exists simultaneously on two levels, the divine and everlasting, and the human and mutable -- real perfection and actual imperfection coexistent in an order which is thought of as both a living, functioning reality (partly within, and partly beyond, time and space), and also as a partially realized ideal which is incomplete because man has not accepted the gifts Christ offers. In a paradox, man's essential sinfulness prevents the realization which God's love makes inevitable.

In the narrowest sense, the Church is the body of communicants united by faith. These people, being human, are not good and are unable to commit themselves irrevocably to the commandments to love God and each other, with the result that the Christian faith and the Christian ethic, which should be dynamic and indivisible, tend to lose connection with each other. Faith is not enough to overcome evil and lead man unflinchingly to love; Christian service is always partial at best. The Christian is only the sinner who glimpses the glory of salvation -- a member of the Communion of Saints "created upon human imperfection, created from what we make of our grotesque state."<sup>9</sup>

One last point is made about Christianity in O'Connor stories. The visible Church is always the least important part of the Christian world. All-embracing love and divine mercy extend far outside its boundaries (Clarkson 120), seeking out the freak, the maimed, the

<sup>9</sup>Flannery O'Connor, "Mary Ann," Jubilee, XII (May 1961), 35.

retarded, the proud, all of whom are equally sinners and equally the recipients of divine love. Frequently, the stories depend for their grim humor on the discrepancy between this concept of what Christianity really is and what man's partial vision makes of it. More important, all of them depend in some essential way on the fact that for their author the basic fact of life is that God is there.

## CHAPTER II

### DISPLACEMENT -- THE MAJOR THEME

"The Displaced Person" is less good technically than many of Flannery O'Connor's other stories. There are questions in my mind as to whether its actual and metaphysical planes are always artistically unified, and whether its surface action prepares the reader adequately for the moral statement with which it ends. There are places, too, where one feels that the meaning of certain symbols is too obviously examined and explained by the author. In spite of imperfections, however, the story is both important and impressive.

It is important in a consideration of Miss O'Connor's work as a whole because it deals directly and in detail with her recurrent central theme of displacement. As Caroline Gordon remarks,

In Miss O'Connor's vision of modern man -- a vision not limited to Southern rural humanity -- all her characters are "displaced persons" not merely the people in the story of that name. They are "off center" out of place because they are victims of a rejection of the Scheme of Redemption. They are lost in that abyss which opens for man when he sets up as God.<sup>1</sup>

It is impressive because of the way its theme is handled. A fairly long story of 54 pages, the action is easy to follow, filled with details that make it amusing, and lively with dialogue that is regional dialect at its best. (As many critics have noted, Miss O'Connor's ear for the vernacular is practically flawless.) Beyond

<sup>1</sup>"On Wise Blood," Critique, II (1958), 9.

all this, however, is the real artistry. Miss O'Connor twists and turns her subject, holding it up to the light of her imagination until she has exposed every outer and inner plane and disclosed a vast, psychologically complex pattern beneath a surface simplicity.

In this story, as in all her work, there is a dualism in the theme of the displaced person. There is man, displaced by his fall from grace, and Christ, displaced by evil and by man's rejection of Him. Here Miss O'Connor shows fallen man in his distorted relationship to God. God is represented by a two-fold concept of Christ who appears as both the Word made flesh and the transfigured Christ of the Second Coming. The displacement theme is developed around the subject of love but, with her customary negative approach, the author shows love's beauty through the ugliness of its opposite.

As she once wrote, "To some extent the writer can choose his subject; but he can never choose what he is able to make live."<sup>2</sup> What she can bring to life is its dark underside, and thus in "The Displaced Person" love is shown through its absence. As an editorial writer for America remarks, "One of the elusive and fascinating aspects of O'Connor is her ability to reflect one face of evil off another,"<sup>3</sup> and this seems a particularly apt description of her technique in this story. Cause and effect merge into chain reaction from a confusion of interrelationships in which characters are both displacers and displaced, depending on the relationship of the moment. The final effect

<sup>2</sup>Letter to James F. Farnham quoted in Farnham, "The Grotesque in Flannery O'Connor," America, CVI (1961), 277.

<sup>3</sup>"God Breaks Through," America, CXII (1965), 821.

is new insight into the limitations of human nature and new awareness of the multiple faces of evil.

A brief study of the main characters in their major relationships will illustrate the point. The story is divided into two major sections in the first of which Mrs. Shortley, the colorful wife of a Georgia tenant farmer, is the central intelligence. Her opinions and illogical logic on a variety of subjects give the story its flavor as the plot develops. Midway the viewpoint shifts, and our vision is widened as we see the same people and the same scene through the eyes and emotions of Mrs. McIntyre, the brisk, brusque farm owner. In the structural arrangement Mr. Guizac, the title figure, stands on the apex of the character pyramid -- one-dimensional, because neither narrator ever sees him as a human being.

The two ladies, Mrs. Shortley and Mrs. McIntyre, balance each other just below him, and the story's design is worked out through their thoughts and actions as life on the farm changes with the arrival of a new tenant farmer, the European D. P. The position of the two women differs somewhat from Mr. Guizac's. Both of them are important because, unlike him, they live in their own country. Mrs. Shortley is introduced as "the giant wife of the country-side" who has the "grand self-confidence of a mountain,"<sup>4</sup> and we feel that she is rooted in the earth and tradition of Georgia as firmly as its geographic features. With the coming of the Guizac family, however, "volcanic" (AGM 220) changes take place within her. She feels that Mr. Guizac's presence

<sup>4</sup>Flannery O'Connor, A Good Man Is Hard to Find (New York, 1955), p. 196. Future references to this book in the text will abbreviate its title as AGM.

jeopardizes her husband's job, and she sees the man as an economic threat to her family's security. He is a Roman Catholic, and in her mind this alien religion seems part of his menace. Fear of the unknown assumes equal importance with the material danger, arousing an emotional response in which "Europe stretches out in [her] imagination mysterious and evil" (AGM 212) every time Mr. Guizac smiles.

Mrs. Shortley is not one of Miss O'Connor's backwoods fundamentalists. The idea of any kind of relationship with any kind of God has never entered her thinking until now when she feels the need for an ally in an economic battle which she translates into religious terms. She enjoys a new feeling of self-righteousness in what she soon begins to see as a holy war against the Devil and his minister, the D. P. and the parish priest responsible for his coming. She sees herself as God's confederate with a duty to displace Mr. Guizac. She reads the Bible as a textbook of tactics and strategy, and finally she is rewarded with a prophetic vision, an apocalypse packed full of Christian symbols. It is the color of the sun (the light of the world), surrounded by clouds shaped like fish (symbols of Christ, or of Christians as partakers of the divine nature of God), and there are eyes inside a circle from which light rays emanate (the infinite omniscience and holiness of God). It is red (the color of love and suffering, and of love of the Faith); white for purity, innocence, peace and joy; gold for light, joy, and glory,<sup>5</sup> and around the whole are fiery wheels. If it is less dramatic than the revelation of St. John, it is at least

<sup>5</sup>Sister M. A. Justina Knapp, O.S.B., Christian Symbols (Milwaukee, 1935), passim.

as good as that of the prophet Ezekiel, but it means nothing to Mrs. Shortley. She simply cannot tell whether it is "going forward or backward" (AGM 218).

The wheels seem intended to draw attention to the similarity between Mrs. Shortley's mystic experience and the prophet's, only to make ironic comment on the differences. Ezekiel's first vision was a preliminary to his close and continuing relationship with a God who personally directed his prophecy to the House of Israel. By contrast, Mrs. Shortley's is a meaningless jumble, a hodge-podge projection of her inner confusion which fades almost instantly with the one ironic word, "Prophecy!" (AGM 218). And what is there for her to prophecy? She has made up a god to serve her own purposes. She has gained no mysterious knowledge, and she is completely unchanged by her experience as we find out very quickly. While she is still standing symbolically high on the hill where she saw her vision, she looks down and sees the priest arriving to pay a call on Mr. Guizac. "Come to destroy," she mutters (AGM 219). It is plain that her supposed ally, God, is in actuality the enemy.

In one sense, Mrs. Shortley is right about the significance of Mr. Guizac's arrival. Mrs. McIntyre does decide to discharge Mr. Shortley as his wife had feared, but this is only remotely Mr. Guizac's fault. There is plenty of work for both men on the farm, and Mr. Shortley is to be fired only because he smokes in the barn and spends his time loafing. The conflict of interests that Mrs. Shortley envisions is almost entirely imaginary but, like other psychological terrors, it becomes real with concrete, destructive, and far-

reaching results. In the battle Mrs. Shortley has constructed in her mind, the Pole wins. The excitement and humiliation of defeat are too much for her heavy body and inadequate heart; she suffers a fatal stroke. But her influence in the story is far from finished. In a way it is just beginning. We have learned what her inadequacies of the heart are, and we can trace their effects as the stain of spiritual disease begins to spread.

We have been told that Mr. Shortley considered his wife omniscient, and in the remainder of the story we see her views reflected in his. We find that Mr. Shortley won his wife in the first place with his imitation of a paralyzed man. This grotesquerie so captivated her that she wanted to "pull his hat down over his eyes and hug him to death" (AGM 221), which, in their marriage, she has done. The Biblical paralytic was healed by Jesus and released into a life of vitality and usefulness. Mr. Shortley, less fortunate, is blind and unfeeling like his wife though he is one of the two characters in the story specifically spoken of as Christian.

The imagery invites an investigation of the question of Mr. Shortley as a Christian and an evaluation of his significance in the story. Miss O'Connor, speaking of him a few weeks after his wife's death, describes a noticeable change in his appearance. He looks depleted, like a man who has "gone for a long time without water" (AGM 240). Mrs. Shortley has, it seems, been his source of spiritual refreshment as well as knowledge. Throughout the story, Mr. Shortley has been spoken of in terms of death. "I'm a dead man," he says of himself at one point (AGM 213), and he has a "corpse-like composure"

(AGM 240). Now the juxtaposed suggestions of his Christianity and of water added to the death imagery bring to mind the Christian sacrament in which all three come together. In Baptism, man finds himself "regenerated and grafted into the body of the Church," cleansed and "dead unto sin" (Clarkson 249). Here Miss O'Connor, with humor and irony, shows us the predicament of man in a godless world. He replaces God with his own image, in this case the formidable image of Mrs. Shortley. She is the means of grace in Miss O'Connor's modern world, conferring death unto righteousness and, ultimately, displacement for everybody. Her disciple, Mr. Shortley, who is "not a violent man" (AGM 245), performs the violent act through the paralysis of inaction as the story reaches its climax.

The other designated Christian is Mr. Guizac, who compares interestingly with Mr. Shortley. The latter, a Christian as contemporary society understands the term, becomes a murderer. Mr. Guizac is the substitute for Christ described in Matthew v.3 when Jesus tells his followers, "He that receiveth you receiveth me, and he that receiveth me receiveth him that sent me." In this role, Mr. Guizac becomes the sacrificial victim as the crucifixion story is played out in a modern analogue. Man, extended the life-giving opportunity to reach out to a suffering fellow human in Christian love, acts instead out of the fear and hatred of spiritual paralysis, with violence and death the inevitable result.

Mrs. Shortley's influence in the story is paralleled by that of Mrs. McIntyre. As a property owner and employer, Mrs. McIntyre is powerful even though her farm is heavily mortgaged. She is thoroughly

materialistic and things have a great deal of meaning for her. Tenants are things to be manipulated in the war against bankruptcy and displacement. She treats them with a humanity born of convention and utility, always giving first consideration to her land. She feels that no one except herself is really at home on her farm; the others are all strangers within her gates.

In her consideration of the question of the alien as displaced person, Miss O'Connor makes the point that man cannot accept the stranger with any kind of humanity simply because he is different. As an old Negro says of Mr. Guizac, "He from Pole. In Pole it ain't like it is here . . . They got different ways of doing" (AGM 225). A worker who does everything quickly and well, Mr. Guizac fits into the life of the farm far better than any of the local tenants, but they resent his differentness and do not accept him as a person. Miss O'Connor suggests that our view of human brotherhood is limited by our spiritual limitations and that our spiritual country is distressingly small.

Indifference leads to the multiplication of evil in this story of displacement as we are shown the displaced becoming displacer and, before the story ends, we see the process extended into yet another cycle of displacement displacing. The final action begins when Mrs. McIntyre discovers Mr. Guizac's plan to bring his stateless, orphaned niece to America as the prospective bride of the only eligible male he knows, a young Negro laborer. Mr. Guizac is about to commit a serious sin against the customs of his adopted country unknowingly, and his innocent defiance of convention disturbs Mrs. McIntyre to the depths of her substitute for soul. Her substitute for God at the superficial

level of her mind is material property, and at the psychological level, it is the social status quo. Her double response to the plan is worked out carefully in the story. On the surface, she acts quickly and pragmatically, telling Mr. Guizac bluntly that what he intends is impossible. Her delayed, and deeply emotional, secondary reaction is quite different, however. After she has dealt with the situation so that it has ceased to be a problem, its subliminal effects begin to intensify in her mind. No idea of the young girl's isolation and suffering can reach Mrs. McIntyre; her inner eye and unconscious are so filled with unspoken, but clearly conveyed, feelings about the sexual implications of the proposed marriage that she sees Mr. Guizac as an evil power making her feel dispossessed in her own country. When she sees the familiar face of shiftless, useless Mr. Shortley returning to the farm after an unsuccessful job hunting expedition, she has "the feeling that she is the one returning after a long miserable trip, to her own place" (AGM 239). Mr. Shortley may spell financial ruin for her, but he never forces her into alien territories of moral confrontation with herself.

Mr. Guizac, on the other hand, has upset her so completely that she can no longer tolerate his presence. She has said in the past, "That man is my salvation!" (AGM 209). This, of course, is his function in the story. On the narrative level, his willingness to work and his frugality can save the farm. On the metaphysical level, the salvation he offers is no less real but a bit more complicated. It demands something of her -- love and the comprehension of suffering -- but, being spiritually blind and emotionally frozen, she does not see her own shortcomings or feel his need. She cannot forgive him his

threatening differentness, and she now looks for rationalizations and reasons why she is morally obligated to discharge him and to displace him once more.

She tells herself that he is ungrateful for all that she has done for him, though in actual fact it is she who does not appreciate what he has done for her. With no evidence to support her, she decides that his foreign ways are upsetting the Negroes and concludes with rational irrationality, "He didn't have to come in the first place" (AGM 239). Defiantly, she assures herself that she is not responsible for the world's misery, and her statement has an unspoken corollary. Not being responsible for evil, she feels no obligation to try to alleviate the resulting misery. Miss O'Connor has put her argument in such a way that the reader senses the strong implication that, for her, the refusal to become involved in mankind is the real evil from which all displacement derives.

During this period of internal conflict, Mrs. McIntyre's face shows a "deep vertical pit [that has] plunged down from under her red bangs into the bridge of her nose" (AGM 233), and we see in her facial expression the characteristics of her spirit as well. Her worship of convention has made her reaction against Mr. Guizac so strong that she sees him "as if she were watching him through a gunsight" (AGM 236). Seeing him, she sees her own life in new terms -- as a lifelong battle against the world's overflow. She feels that D. P.'s are all the same "whether they come from Poland or Tennessee" (AGM 236), and they are always the enemy, with their demands on the purse and the heart. God as suffering man is the enemy too, and unconsciously she wishes him

dead.

Her emotions exhaust her, and she withdraws to the back hall of the farm house which she uses as an office. It is "dark and quiet as a chapel" there, and the small, empty safe is "locked and set like a tabernacle" (AGM 232) on her desk, but the gods of materialism fail her and her vigil only confirms her feeling that there is "nobody poorer in the world than she" (AGM 233). The idea of Mrs. McIntyre as "the poor" is insisted on and a Biblical parallel suggested. The pertinent consideration of the term comes from the Beatitudes which appear in Matthew and Luke, with different wording and meaning. Miss O'Connor makes use of both, playing one against the other.

In the Douay version of the Bible, Luke vi.20 reads: "Blessed are you poor for yours is the kingdom of God." The poor here are the economically deprived with whom Mrs. McIntyre has always identified herself as she struggles to save her farm. The Interpreter's Bible suggests that the verse also refers to those "whom the world pushes aside with contempt,"<sup>6</sup> one of whom Mrs. McIntyre feels herself about to become. She has fought gamely against alien evil, she believes, but the last encounter with Mr. Guizac has been too costly. The "world's overflow" (AGM 236) is ready to overwhelm her.

In Matthew v.3 the phrasing is somewhat different: "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The verse does not seem to be quite the same as its counterpart in Luke. Poverty of spirit is that consciousness of unworthiness which, for

<sup>6</sup>George A. Buttrick, gen'l. ed., VIII (Nashville, 1952), 118.

the Christian, is the beginning of the humility which destroys the sin of pride. In Canto xii of The Purgatorio, Dante meets the Angel of Humility who erases pride from his forehead, leaving him feeling so free that he asks Virgil, "Master, what heavy load/ Has slipped from me so that I walk with ease/ And scarcely feel fatigue upon the road?"<sup>7</sup> This is the orthodox Christian concept, but it is scarcely the feeling Mrs. McIntyre is experiencing. Her poverty overburdens her with worry and, in consequence, she is determined to get rid of Mr. Guizac whom she holds responsible for her problems. The new feeling of animosity toward him is the motivation for her part in his murder. Mrs. McIntyre is poor, we see, because her gods have failed to show her poverty as a preliminary to love.

Mr. Guizac offers an interesting comparison. He is the character in the story who fits all definitions of the word "poor." He has been deprived of all his goods, pushed aside by cruelty, and he is the sufferer whose misery has taught him compassion. Ironically, his concern for the life of his niece leads, in the complex of displacers displaced, to his final displacement in violent death.

War caused the initial displacement, the Southern racial evil the second. Now, all variations on the theme come together in the climactic scene. Mr. Guizac is lying on the ground working on a small farm tractor; Mr. Shortley is driving a larger machine which seems to warm him "as if its heat and strength sent impulses up through him that he instantly obeyed" (AGM 249). Mrs. McIntyre, standing on the

<sup>7</sup>Dorothy L. Sayers, trans., (Baltimore, 1955), p. 161.

frozen ground, feels cold "climbing like paralysis up her feet and legs" (AGM 249). Mr. Shortley leaves his tractor unattended for a moment and as Sulk, one of the farm Negroes, and Mrs. McIntyre stand watching, the brake on the parked vehicle slips. Later Mrs. McIntyre remembers

that she had seen the Negro jump silently out of the way as if a spring in the earth had released him and that she had seen Mr. Shortley turn his head with incredible slowness and stare silently over his shoulder and that she had started to shout to the Displaced Person but that she had not. She had felt her eyes and Mr. Shortley's eyes and the Negro's eyes come together in one look that froze them in collusion forever, and she heard the little noise that the Pole made as the tractor wheel broke his backbone.

AGM 249-50

The images of heat and cold, of hatred in both its forms, merge in the violent inaction that kills Mr. Guizac. The hate displayed here is dependent on the complex emotions which the D. P. has aroused -- fear, jealousy, and the inverted and submerged sexual antipathy. His death takes place in what seems to be the final circle of Hell where separation from God occasions the displacement of man from his own humanity and from his fellows in a cold, unequivocal lack of love which the three characters recognize in their one unguarded look into each others' hearts, a look that leads to one more degree of displacement in these guilt-ridden people. The dead Pole becomes displacer, the Negro and Mr. Shortley displaced. The two have clung so tightly to their homes and jobs that they have committed murder for them, but now they cannot live with each other and what they have done together. Both leave the farm, and all that it implies as symbol of the Promised Land. Mrs. McIntyre suffers a nervous collapse and, with her physical displacement, the man whose arrival had offered salvation for

everybody (economic salvation for Mrs. McIntyre, physical salvation for his niece, and spiritual salvation for any who were willing to extend a hand to him in sympathy) becomes the means of total displacement instead.

What happens on the surface of the story may not be enough to explain Mrs. McIntyre's sudden and permanent disintegration but, in spite of this possible fault, the story's vision is imposing. People, frozen by fear so that they cannot feel any kind of love or understanding, are brought to life so convincingly that the reader feels their spiritual emptiness and knows that Mr. Guizac is not responsible for their exile. His arrival has simply made everybody act out what they already were inside.

What we are given in this intricate examination of dispossession is not so much an admiration of Miss O'Connor's technical virtuosity, though it is considerable, as a candid view of a modern world in which one form of evil generates another in situations which the characters neither understand nor control. We glimpse for ourselves something of the real complexity of morality among people who have no clear idea of what their world is like or what its standards and values really are. The horror in the story is strong, but it does not derive from some romanticized Gothic representation of life; it comes from the story's insistent realism. Mrs. McIntyre is someone we all know; Mr. Shortley is a familiar figure on the downtown streets any Saturday afternoon; and Mrs. Shortley is behind a counter at the Curb Market. They are all at home in our world, and their behavior is understandable and logical in the circumstances presented. We know that their world, and ours, is

not confined to the American South, for their emotions and reactions are human, not regional. They are the unblesséd poor who cannot see God because they have refused to accept the fact of evil as something relevant to themselves. To them, moral corruption is always something terrible, and easily recognized, perpetrated by foreigners in some other place. Thus conditioned, they cannot see evil in themselves or accept those displaced by it. Their own dimmed vision leads them into the depths of the dark wood where chaos and confusion abound. It is to this hidden dimension of human existence that Miss O'Connor holds up her mirror and reflects man as she sees him, man without God.

This is not the final statement of her story, however. Her interpretation of life is Christian and, while she shows us the failure of man's relationship to God, she also suggests his possible triumph in relating to the transcendent God. The peacock is her symbol for the risen Christ and for His Grace. He appears at the very beginning and end of the story and is seen as he relates to its various characters. The bird, who struts through the story as the symbol of salvation, is a failure as an emblem of epiphany. Mrs. Shortley's unseeing eyes regard him and she might "have been looking at a map of the universe, but she didn't notice it" (AGM 204). To Mrs. McIntyre, he is only "another mouth to feed" (AGM 202) and one she tolerates "only out of a superstitious fear of annoying the Judge in his grave" (AGM 228). The Judge, her late husband, loved peacocks and, in his lifetime, they were everywhere on the farm. As an old Negro tells the cock, "I remember when it was twenty of you walking about this place and now its only you and two hens . . . You and two hens now" (AGM 228).

A slight digression seems in order here. Miss O'Connor raised peacocks as a hobby, and she once made the statement that "those that withstand illnesses and predators seem impossible to destroy except by violence."<sup>8</sup> Violence is a word and an action that recurs repeatedly in O'Connor fiction and essays, and it is important that we understand her preoccupation with it. What violence means to her is perhaps best explained in Matthew xi.12, from which the title of her second novel is taken: "But from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has been enduring violent assault, and the violent have been seizing it by force." As, in "The Displaced Person," they continue to do. The peacocks in the story represent God's proffered love and mercy, but in the violence of a godless world His gift is ignored and the birds have been much depleted. What matters in the story, however, is that they are still alive on the farm.

The Judge who owned them was an earthy old man, unusually unattractive, with "tobacco-colored teeth and hair" (AGM 228), and though he is dead before the story begins, he is its liveliest character. He lived with relish and verve and now is "sunk in the cornfield with his family . . . always at home" (AGM 228). His peacocks attract no one now except the dull and unimaginative old priest who comes occasionally to see the Guizacs. We wonder what we are to make of these two old men, no more appealing or impressive than the rest of the characters, but both so obviously serene. Neither is in any overt way successful. The worldly, snuff-dipping Judge dies penniless, and the

<sup>8</sup>"Living with a Peacock," Holiday, Sept. 6, 1961, p. 52.

shabby priest is unable to convert Mrs. McIntyre or do anything to save Mr. Guizac. Though both are aware of the transfigured Christ (the peacock), they are very much like everyone else, except that each, in his own way, is thoroughly at home. What does it mean? Are they the good men of the story collection's title? The answer may be as simple and as complex as the Christian paradox itself. There are no good men because saint and sinner are one and the same. Man fails because he is human, and the failure can lead him into the vortex of human suffering and the depths of dispossession and evil, but the result is not tragedy because there always remains the gift of Redemption.

"Good works" are not a prerequisite for salvation. They would be the spontaneous, natural action of the Christian which would create the kingdom of God. (The farm would then assume its true symbolic meaning as both "home" and "kingdom.") But in the sinful world, Christian charity is circumvented by the power of evil, as in the case of the old priest, or is entirely lacking, as in the case of the Judge. While the peacock lives, however, there is always the possibility that man may yet recognize his God and find his home where the violence of evil will be displaced, as Albert Schweitzer puts it, by "truth, peaceableness, meekness, and kindness . . . the violence that can master all other violences."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Quoted in Greensboro Daily News, Sept. 6, 1965, p. A10.

### CHAPTER III

#### LIFE AND DEATH IN THE MODERN WORLD

"The Life You Save May Be Your Own" is filled with the familiar figures of the Southern Gothic nightmare, the depraved, the maimed, the afflicted. I have chosen it as a story characteristic of Miss O'Connor's early work to show that, while she does adopt a literary convention, she uses it with originality for artistic purposes of her own, pushing it beyond the psychological horizons which usually confine the Gothic to touch universals of contemporary experience.

The story appears to be art reduced to its simplest terms. There are five characters, only three of whom are major figures and, of these, one is a mentally defective deaf mute. The burden of the story's development must be carried by the remaining two. The use of an objective narrator limits the characters still further, presenting them to the reader almost entirely through externals. Their real lives are hidden behind masks, and they are separated from their audience by the same vast distances which isolate people from each other in life. As the action progresses, they reveal themselves little by little as real people do, through their words and actions.

Setting is the barren landscape of a lonely, deteriorating mountain farm, and the action is confined to a single conflict between the incompatible desires of the two protagonists. The story's atmosphere of drabness and deprivation depends on a lack of ornamentation and an economy of style which create a deceptive starkness. Under-

neath textural simplicity there is an intangible emotional richness; it is as though all nonessentials had been carefully stripped away to lay bare the core of life.

With background and detail eliminated, the reader has no visual impression of the farm as a place, knowing only that the old woman who owns it, a Mrs. Crater, and her daughter, Lucynell, are sitting on their porch when the story opens and that they live in a desolate spot. A pump, a fig tree, three or four chickens, and a tumbledown shed in which the square back of an old automobile can be seen, complete the description. Shortage of detail limits the story almost to outline, placing the emphasis almost entirely on the characters. Every break in the painfully flat style brings whatever is imaginatively pictured into an unusually sharp focus, and it is noticeable that the few objects so treated are all elements of the natural world. There is the sun "balancing itself on the peak of a small mountain" (AGM 53), the "fat, yellow moon which appears in the branches of the fig tree as if it were going to roost there with the chickens" (AGM 57), and "the old woman's three mountains . . . black against the dark blue sky . . . visited off and on by various planets and by the moon after it had left the chickens" (AGM 59-60). Miss O'Connor's technical skill places a few insignificant human beings in an almost nonexistent geographical setting and, by limiting detail to the described movements of the bodies of the solar system, naturalizes them in the universe itself. The people, and the action about to take place, are automatically lifted from the ordinary into a strange cosmic significance so emphatically denied by surface appearances that the characters are given an immediate dra-

matic interest.

Quite clearly they are intended to be more than real people, but they come to life in brief descriptions. Mr. Shiftlet, a tramp, appears on the road to the farm one evening at sunset, a slight figure in rusty black with his left coat sleeve pinned up to show that part of an arm is missing. A drifter molded into gauntness by life, and apparently drained of purpose, he seems to move without volition "as if the breeze were pushing him" (AGM 53). As he approaches the house, Mrs. Crater sees his long black hair hanging "flat from a part in the middle to beyond the tips of his ears on either side" (AGM 54), and notices his disproportioned face descending "in forehead for more than half its length (AGM 54) to fill out a picture of humanity at its least attractive. Mrs. Crater herself is "the size of a cedar fence post" (AGM 54) and wears a man's old felt hat pulled down over her head. She seems rooted in her own unproductive countryside, beaten into almost subhuman shape by the hardships of her existence. Her daughter, a large girl incongruously dressed in blue organdy, is described in terms of her mindless activities. She hangs her head between her knees, peeping out upside down through a triangular opening she has made in her overturned hair, and falls whimpering to the floor for no discernible reason. The characters are plainly the spiritual poor, living joyless lives in a world that hardens and deadens the soul. The idiot girl who sees life upside down is perhaps the most fortunate of the three because she lacks the wit to know what it means to be human. Her life is a kind of vegetable existence in which primary physical sensation is the summum bonum. The world Miss O'Connor is

creating seems a monstrous place to which only the mental defective is naturally adapted.

The story's elimination of everything but essentials makes characters larger than life and less realistic, and the same simplicity makes structure easy to examine. Though lacking one kind of complication, it follows a characteristic pattern of intricacy. Many of Miss O'Connor's stories move almost entirely on the level of metaphor and symbol, often forming a system of metaphysical planes which work in the story to inform each other. Here there are three such surfaces, and the characters relate to each other in different ways on each to form one multidimensional pattern which, in the end, makes the central statement on the nature of man which is the story's chief concern. There is a level of outrageous allegory in which the three characters are placed in one-to-one correspondence with certain human attributes to suggest the discrepant bits and pieces into which the individual is broken by the world the story has already defined; there is myth, in which Mr. Shiftlet becomes the archetypal wanderer and seeker; and, finally, what I choose to call the level of mirror image, in which Mr. Shiftlet is presented as a distorted reflection of the figure of Christ.

As allegory, the story is alive with macabre humor and an Appalachian version of Gothic horror. The selection of a brokendown mountain cabin and an ancient automobile as symbols of the human body and spirit has a special acerbity. The metaphoric choice of the defunct automobile to represent the element of the personality which, in Christian orthodoxy, relates man to the divine provides comic relief, heightening the singular seriousness of the story. The symbolic con-

struct is extended to include the characters, and the meaning of the allegory is developed through the grisly comedy of their conflict with each other.

Mother and daughter have been the only occupants of the old house since the death of the old woman's husband fifteen years earlier and, without him, the farm has been gradually falling into ruin. Mr. Crater, the deceased, is intellectual principle in an Aristotelian sense, responsible for balance and order within the personality -- a faculty which Miss O'Connor suggests is dead in modern man. The two women who remain to live in squalor both bear the same name, Lucynell Crater, and seem to be two aspects of one human being in whom equilibrium has been destroyed. Mrs. Crater seems to represent the spirit principle, blunted, but aware of what the natural order should be. She wants a man on the place and a husband for her daughter. She has the natural, primitive desire for family, home, and continuity though it is made grotesque by the fact that her daughter is an idiot. There is something in her comic singleness of purpose which mockingly echoes Aristophanes' contribution to the discourse on love in "The Symposium." Mrs. Crater is like one of the divided parts of the originally whole nature, separated, but longing for the former state of oneness with such intensity that she will make any compromise to reach it. She is ready to overlook her daughter's defects or to reduce her expectations to fit them so that even Mr. Shiftlet will do as a prospective son-in-law. In her eyes, even a marriage between him and Lucynell would make the dilapidated cottage into a kind of home, inhabited by a unified family however inadequate its individual members.

Lucynell, in addition to being mentally retarded and dumb, is almost blind. Living in her solitary interior world, she spends much of her time playing idly with her fingers. Though she is able to understand a few uncomplicated commands and to do a few of the simplest housekeeping tasks, she can contribute little or nothing to the unity of being Mrs. Crater is trying to establish. She is completely dependent on her mother though she is not bright enough to love her. She seems to represent spiritual instinct isolated from reason in the man who, having lost his capacity to see and feel, is cut off from himself as well as from the outer world.

Mr. Shiftlet, as the modern intellectual principle, does not fit into the pattern Mrs. Crater longs to create. He insists that he would like to live always in one place where he could see the world whole but, as the intellect which has lost its connection with spiritual reality, he is unable to assume his proper identity or find his moral home. He seems to be the quality of moral intelligence of which he is always talking, but in such a twisted form that he is unwilling to see himself as a part of a permanent whole and unable to realize that the satisfaction he seeks can be found in no other way. The farm offers him both home and opportunity to see the sun go down every evening, which he says is what he wants. Farm and sun are familiar O'Connor symbols for the natural world as a part of the kingdom of God and for God Himself. Mr. Shiftlet sees their value with his intellect but, because of his own limitations, and those of the Craters, he cannot settle into what, in a less imperfect world, would be his rightful place as a part of a whole personality in an ordered universe of which

God is the center. Surprisingly, Mr. Shiftlet has a good deal in common with Ivan Karamazov as the spiritual victim of rationalism. Ivan expresses Mr. Shiftlet's reverence for life and nature and the idea of God. He would want to live, he says, even if his faith in all he holds dearest were destroyed; he loves the sticky little leaves and the blue sky; he sees love as the great mystery transcending logic. His tragedy, like Mr. Shiftlet's, is that he knows love only intellectually; it is something he recognizes and examines but cannot feel. Both men are driven in the same endless search.

To Mr. Shiftlet, the proposed marriage is a means to obtain possession of the old automobile which will enable him to wander farther and faster than he is able to on foot. The desires of the separated parts of the human personality should, in any natural order, coincide or complement each other to create a patterned harmony, but in Flannery O'Connor's country, where fragmentation of the individual is complete, internal strife is inevitable. Lucynell, as dumb instinct, becomes a pawn between reason and spirit. The two do not seem to be put in opposition to each other to suggest the superiority of one over the other, but rather to show their basic uncongeniality, their shabby limitations.

Mrs. Crater insists on a marriage which is wrong for everybody, and Mr. Shiftlet accepts it for the wrong reason. It ends with the complete and final separation of the three. Mrs. Crater is left alone in an empty house; Lucynell is abandoned in an all-night cafe, unable to tell who she is or where she belongs, and Mr. Shiftlet is on his way to Mobile. In the allegorical reading, the conflicting desires

within the diseased human mind have succeeded in tearing the personality to pieces. The meanness of the tawdry characters adds its own comment to the definition of the nature of modern man which Miss O'Connor has presented, depriving him of the dignity and grandeur he commands in his struggle with the powers of good and evil which mark the works of Dante and Milton. The story points to a fundamental change in the essence of the human dilemma. The very distinction between good and evil has become blurred to a point where the two no longer seem to exist as significant forces in clearcut opposition, but are replaced by warring desires and instincts in man who is now an absurdity, helpless in his separation against himself.

Discussing Flannery O'Connor's technique, John Hawkes quotes Edwin Honig on the making of allegory. Mr. Honig says that "the challenge was to map out the relation of the unknown country of allegory to the known country and conditions of contemporary actuality."<sup>1</sup> Miss O'Connor seems to have done just that, making the unknown country of allegory into the known country of rural Georgia and the dark actuality of the lost soul.

Miss O'Connor speaks of the artist's need to make delicate adjustments so that one world can be seen through another in a story (LN 163), and, in "The Life You Save," myth is seen through allegory, the shift in focus emphasizing details obscured in the first reading. On the level of myth, Mr. Shiftlet assumes the role of the seeker after truth, a manifestation of Everyman, as he himself makes clear. As he says, he might be Tom T. Shiftlet from Tarwater, Tennessee, or

<sup>1</sup>"Flannery O'Connor's Devil," Sewanee Review, LXX (1962), 396.

Aaron Sparks from Singleberry, Georgia, or George Speeds from Lucy, Alabama, or Thompson Bright from Toolafalls, Mississippi, and the autobiographical details he supplies support the idea of a multiple identity. He has been a gospel singer, railroad foreman, undertaker's assistant, and soldier in the "Arm Service" (AGM 57) of his country.

He has always drifted, searching for the answers to old, universal questions. What is man? What is he made for? What is the nature of the human heart? The story can be compared with The Odyssey though Miss O'Connor does not make the overt analogy. Odysseus, though constantly diverted from his goal, is always sure where he is going, always headed toward Ithaca and home. Mr. Shiftlet can scarcely be deflected from his path, though his movement is compulsive and aimless. The mention of any kind of permanence is threatening, words that settle in his mind "like buzzards in the top of a tree" (AGM 62). Unlike Odysseus, he knows no destination; unlike Telemachus, he has no father. The pattern is a common one in modern literature and, although Tom T. Shiftlet of Tarwater, Tennessee is an original, his search for something to believe in is familiar.

Mr. Shiftlet is unimpressed by Mrs. Crater's warning that there "ain't any place in the world for a poor disabled friendless drifting man" (AGM 62). His whole life is governed by the necessity to keep moving, and he wants the old Crater car. The automobile, the mark of status in America, and the symbol of the rootlessness of the seeker who has lost his direction, is an ancient model of undetermined make and age, long unused and falling apart. The fact that the wretched thing is enough to satisfy Mr. Shiftlet indicates his poverty of spirit,

and Mrs. Crater's willingness to use it as a bribe demonstrates her moral destitution. These people are ordinary, their needs are perverse, and their satisfactions sordid, but the nature of their weaknesses makes them powerful symbols of anomie as they move in personal inefficacy against the background motion of the planets.

With his search taking precedence over everything else, Mr. Shiftlet is able to marry Lucynell and to abandon her without a moment's uneasiness over what he is doing. Tenderness and compassion, even ordinary awareness of other people, have no part in the self-absorption of the undirected spiritual quest but, from the vantage point of the central self, Mr. Shiftlet sees the world's evil in others. People don't care what they do nowadays and the world is almost rotten, he says, though he is careful to keep his own actions outside the range of his moral view. As a man of property, the owner of a car, he becomes self-righteous, feeling a new sense of responsibility to others, ironic under the circumstances. Although he is unconcerned about his wife, he is touched by the sight of a boy in overalls standing by the side of the road with a small cardboard suitcase and "his hat on his head in a way to indicate that he had left somewhere for good" (AGM 66).

I once heard Reinhold Neibuhr say that man without grace (which may be translated as man without identity) can turn in one of two directions. He can retreat into animal nature or into a false rationalism, and either choice will lead him into an action which is a form of violence. The boy and Mr. Shiftlet seem to illustrate the point he was making. The boy is Mr. Shiftlet's parallel, just beginning the wandering that is Mr. Shiftlet's way of life, and the two repre-

sent the two choices Neibuhr gave the spiritually purposeless. Mr. Shiftlet, talking blandly of right and wrong, is the negative choice, the Dostoyevskian spirit turned rationalist, in whom absence of love dims all distinction between right and wrong. All his judgments are warped because he relates to no one and loves neither his neighbor nor himself. His cold, passionless desertion of the helpless is the kind of commonplace negative evil which passes almost unnoticed in a world whose view is partial. On the other hand, the boy, spitting anger with every syllable, has already come face to face with cruelty, and his search will be punctuated with visible, animal violence, stemming from open hatred. His is the positive aspect of the lovelessness that moves Mr. Shiftlet to his less spectacular but equally compassionless actions. As the story ends, the boy has repudiated Mr. Shiftlet's sentimental self-deceptions and Mr. Shiftlet is alone again, racing a thundershower into Mobile. He will get there safely, we feel, but the city is only a temporary way station of evil in his doomed and endless passage.

With Mr. Shiftlet as man alienated from God, the story reaches conclusions about the inevitable failure of the existential search for meaning. It shows man as the seeker after truth which conventional Christianity considers to be his natural state. The search has been perverse in form, however, because it is divorced from its proper object, God, and therefore no more than waste motion. On the story's final level, Mr. Shiftlet has a new function. He appears as the misshapen mirror image of the figure of Christ. The comparison comes into the story so that the figure of man, fragmented and alienated as

he is shown to be, may be measured against Christ as whole and perfect man and as the son of God.

As Mr. Shiftlet first appears, he is facing the sunset with his figure forming a crooked cross. The sun has already been identified many times as a symbol of God; the cross is the Christian cross, crooked because Mr. Shiftlet is not Christ but a dim, human reflection of Him, seen by the light of the significantly descending sun. The sun in this story is always either setting or covered by clouds, suggesting the place God takes in contemporary spiritual experience. God is still present, Miss O'Connor seems to say, but never in the ascendant, and man's relationship to Him is all but nonexistent.

The comparison of Mr. Shiftlet to Christ shows man from a third point of view, extending the story's damning definition of the modern condition. Mr. Shiftlet is quite clearly a man and, as Mrs. Crater immediately observes, he is only a tramp and no one to be afraid of. He is no Christ, threatening the complacent with consuming demands for allegiance and service, only a pallid, human facsimile. He is a carpenter who, though crippled, does make a few improvements on the old farm in spite of his handicap. Feeble-minded Lucynell sees him as "a bird that has come up very close" (AGM 54), and he teaches her to say her first word, "Burrtd!" (AGM 59), explaining to her mother that he has been able to accomplish a miracle because he has stopped long enough and cared enough. Though it has been made plain that Mr. Shiftlet never stops long and does not care, he seems for a moment to be sliding out of his own vulgar humanity into some incredible identification with the real Christ. This is not what the action indicates,

however. The point Miss O'Connor makes is that Christ has been replaced by man in a world which does not understand Him nor recognize its need for him. As she shows in the match Mrs. Crater arranges, Lucynell is the bride of this imitation god, and the marriage, the orthodox symbol of the mystical union between God and man, becomes the ugly thing already examined, a profane, unconsummated relationship between an idiot and a cripple.

The story's title adds the last touch of the characteristic O'Connor black humor whose bite often depends on the disparity between what words say and what they actually mean. "Drive carefully. The life you save may be your own" (AGM 66). Mr. Shiftlet reads the message on a roadside safety sign but, in the context of the story's real meaning, it is an ironic reference to man's rejection of God and its result. Matthew x.38-39 explains it: "And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me./ He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it." Mr. Shiftlet is finding his life, or trying to, in the only way he knows how, in his search for identity. Miss O'Connor feels that the only possible end to such a search is damnation and death, because for man without God there is no possible salvation.

Robert Lowell comments that Flannery O'Connor puts stories together with the control and compression a poet uses to make a good short poem,<sup>2</sup> and "The Life You Save" certainly supports his statement. With three characters in a setting that is almost an abstraction, she manages to give the story the universal significance hinted at in its

<sup>2</sup>"Flannery O'Connor--A Tribute," Esprit, VIII (1964), 33.

early imagery. It examines modern man from several angles to create a cumulative intellectual and emotional sense of the reality of human limitation and failure as one imperfection leads into another. Divided against himself, man is wracked by his own conflicting desires. Confused by these inner contradictions, he lacks a sense of his own identity. Not knowing who he is, he searches only for a self and, though idealism and human passion still make demands on his spirit, he cannot escape from his own ego long enough to reach out to another human being in love -- to establish the relationship which could be the starting point for knowing himself and his place in the universe. Seeing the world as a reflection of himself, he creates a god in his own image whose presence among us does further violence to the human personality. It determines the nature of religious experience whose misdirection is a source of discord between mind and spirit. It isolates man from man, from nature, from himself in a network of circumstance which he cannot, by his own nature, transcend, escape, or control. "The Life You Save" is one of Miss O'Connor's most rigidly dogmatic religious statements, yet it reaches conclusions which give it much in common with the work of her most secularly oriented contemporaries.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE RITES OF SPRING

Many critics and reviewers assume that Flannery O'Connor's physical limitations restricted the geographical and psychological area of her "true country" to the small world in which she spent almost all of her artistically productive life and that her physical dependence on her own mother accounts for the fact that disturbed parent-child relationships appear in some significant form in nearly a third of her nineteen collected stories.<sup>1</sup> On these points it seems to me impossible to come to any definite conclusions. What is more, I think the whole question is unimportant because answers, if there were any, would contribute nothing to what the stories have to say for themselves.

It is true that Miss O'Connor, following the onset of the chronic illness which overtook her in 1951 while she was completing the first draft of her first book, Wise Blood, was forced to leave New England where she was then living and return to Georgia. She was never again well enough to be independent and spent the remaining thirteen years of her life with her widowed mother on a small dairy farm near Milledgeville. Whether she uses this specific locale or another, her view of the world is intentionally narrow, for she is concerned with the depth of human experience rather than its breadth.

As for the conflict between generations, Warren Coffey, writ-

<sup>1</sup>See, e.g., Bliven, p. 220.

ing in Commentary, discusses the unhappy family relationships in Flannery O'Connor's work in the light of her Jansenist background and the religiosity of her work. Jansenism is a seventeenth century doctrine sharing with Protestant Calvinism a belief in predestination and a view of man's physical nature as a barrier to communion with God. Like Puritanism, it results in a morbid emphasis on sin and guilt and repressive attitudes toward human sexuality. The Jansenist tradition, a strong force in both European and American Catholicism, is, in Mr. Coffey's view, a force behind the work of such writers as Mauriac, Greene, and Waugh as well as Flannery O'Connor. In the fiction of all these Catholic artists, he identifies what he calls a "pattern of intense and incommunicable pain arising from sex and transferred by religion into art," Jansenist art, in which "man remains nailed to his mother. When he seeks to break loose, he becomes aware of his crucifixion in which the cross (the woman) suffers equally with the sacrifice itself (the man). Crucifixion is punished for being the cross but it is the only form of love."<sup>2</sup> The Puritan dislocation of sex which Mr. Coffey puts in such dramatic terms is a common phenomenon in society and literature and does seem to be a motivating force in Miss O'Connor's "Greenleaf."

Ostensibly this is a story about shifting social and economic patterns as they affect two farm families, one moving up and the other downward on the sociological scale. Tensions in the relations between the two families initially appear to be economic in origin, but the story is developed to reveal their real source in a network of jeal-

<sup>2</sup>"Flannery O'Connor," Commentary, November 1965, p. 98.

ousies and misdirected loves. Two pairs of boys, the sons of Mrs. May, a widow who runs a dairy farm in rural Georgia, and the twin sons of her tenant farmer, Mr. Greenleaf, are constantly compared in terms of their economic achievement, past, present, and future. The widow's sons are an unhappy college instructor and a "policy man" who sells burial insurance to local Negroes. From choice, both live at home though they are no longer very young. Both are unmarried and uninterested in the operation of the farm, though it represents their principal financial security. The Greenleaf twins, on the other hand, are model businessmen who have used every resource available to them to their economic advantage and, as a result, are owners of an up-to-date and highly successful farm of their own. Both are married and the fathers of growing families.

Mrs. May is the main character in the story and her tenant, Mr. Greenleaf, acts as a sort of personal Greek chorus to her, keeping the shortcomings of her sons constantly in the foreground of her mind, their behavior constantly contrasted to that of his own children. The twins, O. T. and E. T. Greenleaf, enter the story only by indirection and are shown to the reader principally through Mrs. May's comically distorted interpretation of their success story. They have been immoderately lucky, she believes, and unscrupulous as well. She imagines that they have perpetrated a long series of frauds and misrepresentations on an innocent and trusting society. They were lucky enough to serve in the Army during World War II and, "disguised in their uniforms they could not be told from other people's children" (ETR 32), and so concealed, they have been able to invade a world which would have closed its doors

to them had they been recognizable as themselves, the undesirable sons of a Georgia cracker. They have been particularly cunning in the means they have adopted to overcome the handicap of their backwoods grammar, cleverly getting themselves sent overseas where they were able to marry French girls (not French trash, either) who did not know good English from bad. In one brilliantly executed plot, both managed to be wounded and now have government disability pensions. As a final insult to decency, the boys came home from military service, took advantage of the G. I. Bill to attend agricultural college and to finance the building of a house that looks just like everybody else's. In twenty years, Mrs. May feels, they will have fooled enough people to be society.

The Greenleaf boys worry Mrs. May because they have met her requirements for success, and her own sons worry her because they have not. She is concerned, too, about her children's antagonism to each other. She attributes it to the fact that they are different personality types. As she says, the only thing they have in common is that neither cares what happens to the place. They are alike in other ways which Mrs. May cannot see, however. Neither shares her cliché view of life, and each has, in his own way, dedicated his life to rebelling against her. Scofield, who shares his mother's materialism, has chosen a job which he knows will be profitable to him and a source of continuing humiliation to her. Wesley, who has a heart defect as the result of a childhood attack of rheumatic fever, teaches at a nearby college, hating the school, the students, his mother, his brother, his home, and himself. His damaged heart is more than physical, and its true nature is explained as his relationship with his

mother is understood.

Mrs. May is disturbed by Wesley's obvious unhappiness and, with one part of her mind, she would like to see him free but, in a few sentences, Miss O'Connor shows us the real bond between mother and son which gives the story its tension. Mrs May worries about Wesley because, although he talks of Paris and Rome, he never goes even to Atlanta. Her concern is genuine as far as it goes, but she does not see that she uses the childhood illness to keep her adult male child dependent on her. Thinking she wants him to travel, she urges him to make plans for a trip and to go to places where he will meet girls, but at the same time she tells him, "You'd go to those places and you'd get sick . . . Who in Paris is going to see that you get a salt-free diet? And do you think if you married one of those odd numbers you take out that she would cook a salt-free diet for you?" (ETR 35).

The disease is not really a rheumatic heart but the unconscious emotional tie which Wesley senses but cannot bring himself to break. His revolt against it is mostly verbal and entirely ineffective except as a generator of self-contempt and hatred. Scofield, though stronger and tougher than his brother, and less sensitive, is victim of the same illness and has been reduced to the same kind of impotence. The house is filled with love turned into a strange form of its opposite as the boys, jealous of each other because of their love for their mother, join together in unholy alliance to punish her for what she has made of them both.

The destructive emotions which distinguish the May brothers are compared to the harmony between the Greenleaf twins who are described

by their Negro handy man as "like one man in two skins" (ETR 43), a comparison which approaches the Renaissance definition of a friend as "the other I." Miss O'Connor makes it comically clear that the Greenleaf boys have never been threatened with consuming mother love. Their own mother, who is one of her most unattractive grotesques, is pictured existing on a purely animal level, in mounds of garbage, dirty clothes, and uncared-for children. Her one positive activity is a kind of obsessive, on-going faith healing project in which she prays for the victims of bizarre accidents and violent crimes in orgies of emotion. Mrs. May is understandably disgusted by Mrs. Greenleaf, who spends hours every day flopping in the dirt shrieking to Jesus. That such a woman should have exemplary sons is a mystery that leaves her helpless with fury.

The story's plot centers on Mrs. May's efforts to get rid of a trespassing scrub bull. The animal, which belongs to the Greenleafs, has strayed onto the May farm where he is eating the shrubbery and, by his faintly ridiculous presence, threatening the purity of her valuable registered stock. The situation is amusing, but the bull's fertility is a real danger. Mrs. May is always close to bankruptcy, and proper breeding of her herd puts necessary money in the bank. No one is concerned except herself, however. The twins, who have found the bull a poor investment, are in no hurry to recover him, and Mrs. May's own sons always enjoy watching their mother struggle with any difficulty.

The virile bull is a sex symbol in the classical tradition, clearly related to the myth of Europa. In the story's first sentence, he appears outside Mrs. May's bedroom window, "silvered in the moon-

light . . . like some patient god come down to woo her" and wearing on the tips of his horns a hedge-wreath "that he had ripped loose for himself" (ETR 24).

Yeats, Joyce, and Eliot, among others, use classical myth in ironic allusion to point up imperfection in modern life, and Flannery O'Connor follows the same practice here. The mythical Europa is attracted by the beauty of a snow-white bull and, mastering her fear of his animal force, approaches him to find him so gentle that he allows her to deck him with spring flowers including, incidentally, May-garlands for his horns.<sup>3</sup> The animal is, of course, Zeus in disguise, and the encounter ends with the violence of abduction and rape. The story continues, however; the union is fruitful and Europa becomes the mother of sons who establish a successful dynasty on the island of Crete. Miss O'Connor twists the elements of the pre-Hellenic fertility myth to form a wry parody on the original. Far from seeming beautiful to Mrs. May, the dark, scraggly bull is at best a nuisance, at worst an object of fear whose male power can do her harm. No virgin brings flowers for him; he simply gets sprays of blossoms tangled in his horns while he is trampling the foundation planting of the farmhouse.

The power of the bull is kept in the reader's mind as he is described as liking to bust loose, as being "like an unleashed, charging force" (ETR 31), and so on. Miss O'Connor is effective in showing Mrs. May's deepening emotional involvement with this special animal as her continuing efforts to get rid of him are frustrated. Little by

<sup>3</sup> Robert Graves, Greek Myths, I (New York, 1959), 197.

little, her feeling about him becomes obsessive. The scrawny bull is always slightly absurd, his function as the symbol of sexuality only hinted at. The skillful understatement and the light tone make a tragic situation neither less real nor less serious, but they do provide comic relief and play a part in emphasizing the fact that no one is to blame for what is happening.

The bull is the subject of conversation at the May dinner table in a central scene which prepares the way for the story's violent ending. The boys always take a masochistic-sadistic pleasure in tormenting their mother in petty ways. In this discussion, Scofield derisively upbraids her for her callousness toward the animal, using the Greenleaf vernacular which he knows she hates. He ends by saying, "I declare, with the Mama I got it's a wonder I turned out to be such a nice boy!" (ETR 44). And Wesley, whose damaged heart is still operative enough to let him see below the surface of things, touches the truth as he tells his brother, "You ain't her boy, Son" (ETR 44). The raw feeling laid bare by his remark leads to a fist fight between the brothers, the motivation of which nobody present truly understands. To the reader, it declares the real importance of the parallel between the Greenleaf boys and the Mays which has been so carefully built up and carried through the story.

The Greenleafs, who, as children, wore Mrs. May's boys' old clothes, hunted with their old guns, swam in her pond, and fished her stream, have, in adulthood, become the men she wished her own sons to be. They are her children, undamaged by stifling affection. However, there was never any bond between Mrs. May and the Greenleaf twins

because she is incapable of unselfish love. Now she hates them for what they are and for what her own sons are not. The comparison, constantly in her mind, is enough to reach Wesley and to make him feel that neither he nor Scofield is her son in any important sense of the word. The resulting feeling of inadequacy is responsible for self-contempt and hatred. He despises himself because he is not what she wants him to be and loathes his mother because she has made him what he is. The gaunt, long-legged bull is the symbol for this malfunctioning love which is wrecking so many lives with its tremendous, destructive power.

A curious double statement is being made here through the symbol of the bull. In the surface story, Mrs. May recognizes his threat to her herd, and therefore to her material well-being but, on the symbolic level where the animal represents a threatening form of love, she does not sense the equally powerful emotional danger. Miss O'Connor seems to be pointing out the partial emotional development typical of a materialistic society. The man whose treasure is possessions puts his heart in the same place and can love his children only with a covetous possessiveness.

The story ends when Mrs. May, having failed to get the bull off her property, commissions Mr. Greenleaf to shoot him. In the final scene she is waiting to see that he finishes the job properly; she dozes in her pick-up truck in the spring sun while Mr. Greenleaf stumbles through the woods looking for his quarry. Without warning, the bull breaks from the cover of the trees and approaches her across the pasture like a "violent black streak" (ETR 52). She stands

immobile in shock, and in a moment she is on his horns and her life is over. The animal, greeting her "like a wild, tormented lover" (ETR 52), penetrates her heart with one horn as the other curves around her side, holding her in an unbreakable grip. The action is described in terms which recall a nightmare with which the story began. In her dream, Mrs. May had visualized something eating through the walls of her house, destroying everything until there was "nothing left but the Greenleafs on a little island all their own in the middle of what had been her place" (ETR 25). She woke to find the stray bull making a meal on the bushes just beneath her window and, at the time, the dream seemed only one of the physical mechanisms the mind devises to keep a sleeper undisturbed, fitting annoying external sounds into the dream pattern. Now it is clear that something more important was at work. Mrs. May's unconscious mind recognizes some nameless menace which is destroying her home and leaving nothing but the Greenleafs unharmed in the approaching ruin. The dream expressed the story's meaning in an undecipherable form. It is restated more clearly in the concentrated violence of the last scene.

Death here has the double significance of physical demise and sexual encounter. At the narrative level, the final engagement with the bull is a meaningless accident but, on the psychological plane, it is an inevitability. The victimizer becomes the victim of her own distorted love in a parody of the May fertility rite. The story departs from myth as both Zeus and Europa die, leaving impotent sons instead of a dynasty. The life force, however, cannot be blotted out even in a disordered society. It is transferred to a vigorous, newly emerging

class, ironically shaped by impersonal forces in the image of the one it is replacing. No praise or blame is attached to anyone in the story; each character merely acts out his assigned part like a participant in the stylized Easter maze dance which was part of the pagan festival.<sup>4</sup>

"Greenleaf" is a story which has won prize after prize, all of which it deserves. It does not need a Jansenist interpretation to tell us something about our society in a parable of modern American life. The parent-child conflict it depicts is essentially sexual, but it contains another element that seems worth commenting on because it has caused critical misinterpretation of several O'Connor stories. Mrs. May, and other obnoxious mothers in other stories, are products of the romantic tradition. They were trained not to see below the surface of life to unpleasant truth underneath, but their children have grown up in a very different environment. They see more because they know Freud, Sartre, Nietzsche, and Genet. They see clearly with the eyes of the intellect, holding the blindness of their elders in fierce contempt. But they see by the light of a knowledge which is partial because it does not reach the heart. They are different from the parents they despise but not better, because their vision does not lead to any kind of wisdom or tolerance or love. It does no more than light up roadsigns in the darkness of the Gothic landscape.

Elizabeth Hardwick speaks of "the violent and crippling aloneness of Flannery O'Connor's zealots."<sup>5</sup> It is a deformity which her

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 297.

<sup>5</sup>"Flannery O'Connor, 1925-1964," New York Review of Books, Oct. 8, 1964, p. 21.

young intellectuals share. The sins of the two groups are not the same and those of the dull middle class parents are different still, but all result from the same inadequacy of the heart and separation from God, making all men, for Flannery O'Connor, beyond redemption except through grace. The most direct treatment of this point appears in the story "Revelation" which reaches its climax when an intolerant college student throws a heavy text book at a smug, complacent older woman. The book used as a primitive instrument of violence is entitled Human Development, suggesting with a subtle irony that there has been none and that none is possible.

There is more to say about "Greenleaf," however. The tonal quality established in the first paragraph with its silvered bull, flowering hedgewreath, and drifting moon, points to the probability that there is a level of action located somewhere beyond the Georgia dairy farm. The repeated connection of the bull with the moon is prominent enough to offer a clue which again relates the story to the Europa myth.

Like other myths that circulated through the various cultures of the Near East, the Mediterranean islands, and eastern Europe, this one has many variations, some of them fragmentary and conflicting. The bull is identified in several versions with a sun god who may be Apollo, and the maiden, sometimes Europa, sometimes Pasiphae, often becomes a moon goddess or a human priestess to the moon goddess of Death-in-Life. In some accounts, there are specific references to a herd of cattle sacred to the god, and the encounter between Europa and the bull is sometimes interpreted as the symbolic marriage of the

sun and the moon. All of these seem to be associated in some way with fertility rites and, in many, the figure of the dying god is prominent.<sup>6</sup> Miss O'Connor uses these several elements of the myth in various ways. That the motif of death-in-life plays an important part in the story has already been indicated, and Mrs. May's role as destroyer of the old and creator of the new shows her closely paralleling the moon goddess. The herd of cattle is so frequently related in some way to the Greenleaf bull that the possibility of the bull as sun god suggests itself, particularly because of Miss O'Connor's undeviating use of the sun as symbol of God.

An interpretation of the story which gives the bull an identity with a sun god reorders the relationships of the characters to each other. All but Mrs. May and the bull himself become figures of secondary importance. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Mrs. May acts as surrogate for the other characters who, like her, are individual and individualistic representations of fallen man. All have rejected the real supremacy of God or have gone further to reject the very idea of Him. There is Mrs. Greenleaf, who uses the idea of religion as an excuse for intense emotional pleasure in violence; Mr. Greenleaf, who piously dismisses God by thanking Him for "everthang" and letting it go at that; Mrs. May, who sees herself as a "good Christian woman with a large respect for religion though of course she [does] not believe any of it [is] true" (ETR 31). To the members of the next generation, religion has no importance at all. Their rela-

<sup>6</sup>Graves, passim.

tionship to it is so tenuous that it only appears on the symbolic level where the bull appears as a manifestation of God. The Green-leaf boys are delighted to be so easily rid of an animal which has turned out to be an economic burden, and the Mays are interested in him only because they enjoy watching him disturb their mother.

In her later stories, Flannery O'Connor several times combines Christian and pagan mythologies in unlikely but effective usages. She does so here. The bull, who appears in the story as love become devourer and devoured, wears a wreath of spirea on his horns to mark him not only as a fertility symbol but also as a god. When it is described as a "menacing prickly crown" (ETR 26), he becomes the Christian dying God, whose suffering is a mark of His perfect love and His promise of redemption in spite of disorder. We are so accustomed to an existential approach to a study of the nature of man that it seems strange to find in the twentieth century idiom a search for essence that recognizes both a relative and an absolute form of love as is presented here. What the story provides is not the customary illumination of one level of meaning by showing the same thing in a different light on another plane, but the dramatic presentation of two different and opposing things in a single symbol.

Mrs. May has betrayed her relationship to death-in-life in the surface story, but in her nightgown, with "green rubber curlers sprouted neatly over her forehead and her face beneath them . . . smooth as concrete with eggwhite paste that drew the wrinkles out as she slept" (ETR 25), she looks very little like a priestess of the moon goddess, or like a child of the living God. To the Christian, however,

the human being in his most unattractive form is still accepted and sought out by a loving God of whom man, in his fallen state, knows so little that He can be dismissed, as here, as "some nigger's scrub bull" (ETR 25).

In the plot which concerns itself with Mrs. May's efforts to get rid of the bull, Miss O'Connor describes the world's determination to pursue, and either drive out or destroy, an intrusive and unacknowledged God. The conflict is between God's love for man and man's hatred for God. Both imagery and meaning are often Blakean, recalling particularly "The Little Black Boy" though, in Miss O'Connor's less gentle expression, the sun "where God does live" is like a "bullet ready to drop into her [Mrs. May's] brain" (ETR 42) because she has not learned, and does not wish to learn, to bear the beams of divine love.

In the puzzling passage from which the quoted simile is taken, Mrs. May, inspecting the Greenleaf milking parlor,

opened the milking room door and stuck her head in and for the first second she felt as if she were going to lose her breath. The spotless white concrete room was filled with sunlight that came from a row of windows head-high along both walls. The metal stanchions gleamed ferociously and she had to squint to be able to look at all. She drew her head out of the room quickly and closed the door and leaned against it frowning. The light outside was not so bright but she was conscious that the sun was directly on top of her head, like a silver bullet ready to drop into her brain.

ETR 41-42

The idea of a cow barn as a visible form of Christian reality is comic but appropriate if we remember the sun god's sacred herd in the Europa myth and the use Miss O'Connor is making of that myth to

characterize the relationship of God and man. Mrs. May, who was able to see quite clearly by moonlight at the beginning of the story, finds the glare of the sun on the concrete walls painful and instinctively withdraws. Outside, the sunlight seems less concentrated and easier to bear, but it is still as dangerous as a bullet aimed in her direction. Because the story makes the sun and the bull aspects of the same thing, the passage is understandable: both are God in unrecognizable but menacing form. In the myth, cows are sacred to the sun god but, in the story, they must be protected from the scrubby trespasser who threatens the purity of their blood lines. The parody constitutes a statement in symbolic form of a basic dilemma of radical Christianity.

Christ, in his life on earth, shocked the moral sense of Israel; he was himself of humble birth, and he sought friends among outcasts -- Mary Magdalene, the harlot, and Simon, the Jew who, as a Roman tax collector, was considered a traitor by his people. Jesus' loving determination to accept the unacceptable antagonized a society which did not embrace the idea of love as the higher morality. Miss O'Connor makes the point that the situation is unchanged today. Love is no better understood now than then, and the values of Christianity are still threats to complacency and materialistic standards. Secular society, which may or may not be nominally Christian, expends much time and energy trying to destroy the menace of a demanding God who asks that man love even as he is loved by God. The white light of divine love is too much for the human to bear because it asks a kind of loving service to his fellow men which is more than he can give. The orthodox Christian insists that man cannot avoid it even though

his human inadequacy makes it seem like a lethal bullet.

Perhaps the point can be made clearer by going back to the bull image and its sexual implications in the story. The pagan symbolism has an exact counterpart in conventional Christianity where the male-female union is taken to represent Christ's union with His Church, a fact made graphically clear in the unexpurgated version of the Anglican marriage service. The herd (which can be taken as the Christian Church in its broadest sense of all the world's people) is still sacred to the sun god and remains his responsibility even though He is regarded as an intruder whose virility is dangerous. It is true that the demands of Christianity, if they were met, would do damage to the secular lives and values of men and, as a result, they will always be looked on with suspicion and disapproval by the world. The beams of love as Miss O'Connor sees them are harsh and cruel compared to those in the Blake poem which bring comfort and joy, but they are the same thing. Blake speaks of the ideal only, while Miss O'Connor incorporates the two Christianities which are so continually present in her work. She writes severely of the actual because she measures it against the ideal.

The story's final scene is acted out in a "green arena" (ETR 50) of pasture land almost as if it were a ritual drama presented on a stage. The field is edged with the dark, jagged treeline which is often an O'Connor symbol for the barrier separating man from nature and from God. The intrusive sun is red hot overhead, and Mrs. May closes her eyes against it as she has repeatedly throughout the story. Her failure to recognize and accept the proffered gift of divine love

has been clearly indicated in her reaction to the sun. Her feeling about the bull is part of a metaphor which is subtler, funnier, and more graphic in its suggestion that man cannot possibly recognize God as long as his values are molded by the world in which he lives. Mrs. May, as a farm owner, must look at the bull in terms of economic profit and loss; any other view would ruin her. Man is man and destined to fail, but God is God and ordained to triumph as the scene now shows.

The two aspects of the violent creative energy of God have pursued Mrs. May through the story. In dreams she has felt the sun

trying to burn through the treeline and she stopped to watch safe in the knowledge that it had to sink the way it always did outside her property . . . Then suddenly it burst through the treeline and raced down the hill toward her. She woke up with her hand over her mouth and the same noise, diminished but distinct, in her ear. It was the bull.

ETR 47

In the story's last paragraphs, the dream comes true and the bull, instead of the sun, breaks from the Dantean wood. As Mrs. May watches in frozen disbelief, he charges. The sun has given his light and heat away to no purpose for her, and she has found no comfort in morning nor joy in the noonday of human experience, but now the pursuing God captures her at last. In one violent moment of confrontation, the bright vision to which she has closed her eyes is forced upon her. As a horn pierces her heart, her dying impression is recorded. The entire scene in front of her changes in one eternal moment of perception. "The treeline [is] a dark wound in a world that is nothing but sky -- and she [has] the look of a person whose sight has been suddenly

restored but who [finds] the light unbearable" (ETR 52). Mr. Greenleaf appears with the gun and in another instant the bull, too, is dead.

If the story ended here one would have to concede that it speaks of the judgment and damnation so many critics find in Miss O'Connor's work. Earlier, Mrs. May has warned her sons that if they do not learn something about farming they will find themselves in trouble after she dies; they will "find out what Reality is when it's too late" (ETR 35). This would be the meaning of the story for her if the farm, beyond its naturalistic existence, were not also the arena of what is eternal and absolute. Mrs. May has always shut her eyes to light; "Get away from here, Sir!" (ETR 25), she tells the bull. But the sun shines hotly, and the bull charges. In the moment of death, held in God's unbreakable grip, she finds the light unbearable but at last she sees. Like Blake's little English boy, she still needs protection from the full glare of love, but she can learn to bear it, as he can. The purpose of the violent judgment is not damnation but revelation of the full power of grace offered by the divine sacrifice. This is what Mrs. May sees in her final instant of life, the "last discovery" (ETR 53) she whispers in the animal's ear.

The story at this level is a statement of the Christian doctrine of the Atonement, bizarre and original in feeling, but conventional in theme. As Miss O'Connor knew, it is a statement that will not reach many of her readers as truth. However, a recognition of it is important because the story's force grows out of the tensions between its layers. Symbols change meaning. Death on one level

becomes life on another. And, as images alter and conflict, they generate a subliminal emotional power that gives a peculiar meaning to her picture of the familiar figure of modern man in a universe he cannot accept or escape.

## CHAPTER V

### PROPHET AND EVANGELIST

Fourteen months before she died, Flannery O'Connor, writing to a friend about her plans for the future, made the statement: "I've been writing eighteen years and I've reached the point where I can't do again what I know I can do well."<sup>1</sup> One can never say what someone might have done if he had lived, but an examination of Miss O'Connor's work suggests that she may have been right in thinking that her contribution to the short story form was completed. At any rate, it is hard not to feel that she had at least reached some kind of plateau. Even a casual reading of her stories reveals a degree of repetition surprising in such a small body of work by so talented an author. "The Lame Shall Enter First" is a reworking of The Violent Bear It Away; "Judgment Day" is another version of "The Geranium," a different and better story, but a reuse of the same material. And comment has already been made on the fact that so many of the stories study the clash between parents and their grown children.

Surface variety tends to conceal other equally basic similarities. The last stories say the same thing as the first ones and in the same ways. They say it better, but not differently, and what appears at first to be development is seen to be only increased skill

<sup>1</sup>Letter to Sister Mariella Gable, O.S.B., quoted by Sister Mariella in "Flannery O'Connor--A Tribute," p. 27.

in applying old formulas to the same given elements. The last published story, "Parker's Back," for example, re-examines the search-for-identity-as-a-search-for-God which was the subject of "The Life You Save," using the literary devices of "The Displaced Person." It employs Old Testament stories and Gospel parables as parallels as it describes blighted humanity, working all the materials into a unit held together by a new deftness in controlling comic tone. The story is a blazing success, but its very perfection lessens its emotional impact, its brilliance too dependent on conscious manipulation of form and matter. One story, "Revelation," avoids this fault -- and all others -- to become the most unqualifiedly successful of all Miss O'Connor's stories. The whole paraphernalia of religious attitudes so often awkwardly incorporated into the fabric of her work is here generated entirely from within the consciousness of the main character. All technical problems are solved; every detail is right; nothing is overdone. And, in addition, it contains a speech which is unsurpassed as the concise statement of the collective beliefs of a social class: "One thang I know," the white-trash woman said. "Two thangs I ain't going to do: love no nigger or scoot down no hog with no hose." (ETR 199). What it says may not be new, but neither Miss O'Connor nor anybody else ever put it any better.

As these comments may suggest, Miss O'Connor's work is masterful but uneven in maturity as it is in earlier stages of development, if for different reasons. There is in all of it, however, a uniformity in its special quality of urgent vitality. However fantastic, however limited, it always moves and breathes. The stories I have

used for analysis were chosen to give some idea of the range within the narrow limits she sets herself and of her several approaches to the short story. A selection cannot give a complete description of her work, but it can be used as a basis for forming some general conclusions about the substance of the peculiar life that permeates all of it.

It is noticeable that the stories share important characteristics with the work of many of the secular writers of her generation, picturing the same lonely world in which the human spirit exists, purposeless, in a landscape of nightmare. As D. H. Lawrence has pointed out, the Gothic genre has always been important in American fiction because it provides a way to reach below the surface affluence and optimism of American life to the violent reality underneath. Miss O'Connor finds Gothic grotesquerie the natural medium for the modern writer who is Christian because she believes that "those who see by the light of the Christian faith will have, in these times, the sharpest eyes for the grotesque, for the perverse and the unacceptable" (LN 162) and that the problem of the Christian artist who measures the actual by the absolute is to make perversions "appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural" (LN 163).

Miss O'Connor makes the world's disorder compelling in her stories by setting up a contrast between the non-Christian, or the partially Christian, life in her country and the ideal of Christian love, which man is unwilling to accept as God's gift and unable to practice in his own life. She is successful because she manages to bring the world as the orthodox Christian understands it -- full of tensions and anomalies, partiality and completeness -- out of theo-

logical abstraction into the stuff of living fiction.

As a radical Christian, she takes the measure of man's faults and failures and finds him basically evil, but (and here she departs entirely from the secular) she sees him concurrently as the beloved child of the living God. The inevitable result is tragicomedy and, in her hands, the combination of failure and triumph, absurdity and divinity, is uproariously funny even when it is cruelest, with a humor that is easy to identify as irony but hard to analyse further. Many critics, bemused by Wise Blood, define it as some ingenious application of Gothicism, but Brainard Cheney seems to make a more accurate assessment. He suggests that Miss O'Connor may have invented a new form of humor.

This invention consists in her introducing her story with familiar surfaces in an action which seems secular and in a secular tone of satire or humor. Before you know it, the naturalistic situation has become metaphysical and the action appropriate to it comes with a surprise that is humorous, however shocking. The means is violent but the end is Christian.<sup>2</sup>

The means itself is Christian, growing out of an orthodoxy whose intensity gives a kind of patterned fierceness to all Miss O'Connor's work.

Behind all her stories is the moral vision, essentially prophetic, and the burning conviction of the evangelist, illuminating the fictional landscape she creates from her artist's imagination. Flaws and errors in her work seem surprisingly unimportant as the Christian prophet and evangelist merges with the artist to give the countryside

<sup>2</sup>"Flannery O'Connor's Campaign for Her Country," Sewanee Review, LXXII (1964), 557.

of south central Georgia the depth and breadth and height of human experience. The non-Christian may find Miss O'Connor's work difficult, but any reader who approaches it with reasonable critical intelligence will find that it is art, and many, I believe, will agree that it is its religiosity which makes it art.

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