



Grace and the Grotesque: Redemption in the Southern Literature of Flannery O'Connor

To our softened, modern sensibilities, the stories of Flannery O'Connor are shocking. They are seemingly dark with despair, fraught with the destruction of the innocent, and devoid of happiness or joy. In a word, her stories are part of the Southern genre called "grotesque", which radically contradicts the modern desire for positivity and uplifting sentimentalities. It may be even more shocking to some that Flannery is a Catholic author, especially as her stories seem to portray everything *but* the hope of Christ's Resurrection. And yet, beneath the grotesque surface, Flannery is deeply theological, and the mystery of Christ is a constant theme in her stories, even if it is veiled behind the sufferings of life. Understanding the baptized imagination of Flannery O'Connor requires us to see that the redemption from sin and suffering, won for us by Jesus Christ's death on the cross, is continually operative within her stories.

Throughout her lifetime, Flannery received much criticism for her lack of optimism, largely because she was a Catholic author. In an address to Georgetown University, Flannery cites the "failures" of the Catholic author, according to modern society. "The Catholic novelist is failing to reflect the virtue of hope, failing to show the Church's interest in social justice, failing to show life as a positive good, failing to portray our beliefs in a light that will make them desirable to others."¹ Nevertheless, a novel fulfilling those requirements, according to Flannery, would ultimately fall into the secularization of our society, denying the difficulties of reality and demanding that we only talk about religion in positive

terms—or not at all. For Flannery, however, if the Catholic novelist merely presents reality in a falsely optimistic light, then he is not truly presenting reality—rather, he is simply being sentimental, without truly seeing the brokenness of our sinful world.²

We may still wonder, however, why Flannery chooses the "grotesque" genre for her work. Looking to her own commentary on her writing can be helpful in answering that question. Because she is a Catholic, Flannery is clear about the lens through which she views the world: "The meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and . . . what I see in the world I see in its relation to that."³ Thus, despite the surprising "grotesque" aspects, everything in her stories is in reference to Christ's redemption. In other words, the very nature of the grotesque can reveal something about the person of Christ. As such, Flannery does not present the redemption in a merely sentimental way; rather, the redemption of Christ is intrinsically linked with the hard reality of life. As Flannery explains: "Redemption is meaningless unless there is cause for it in the actual life we live, and for the last few centuries there has been operating in our culture the secular belief that there is no such cause."⁴ Our modern society has adopted a Manichean spirit,⁵ separating spiritual realities from the material world; we do not actually see redemption as operative in our own lives. Some deny that we need redemption at all, while others see the redemption as merely an addition to our lives, rather than a process that is at work within us.

Flannery continues: "The novelist with

Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural."⁶ This is where the element of shock enters Flannery's stories.⁷ As Pope Benedict XVI explained in an address to artists, our modern society has become so dulled to beauty that we need to be *shocked* by it.⁸ In a similar way, Flannery would say that we have distorted and changed the true meaning of life to the point that we no longer recognize these distortions. We have distorted beauty, we have distorted the reality of being, and we have distorted the meaning of life. We view the world in a purely utilitarian way: everything in this life is to be used for our own personal advancement. We do not think about the spiritual and transcendental aspect of life; thus, Flannery sees the necessity of shocking our modern sensibilities out of their slumber, so that we are awakened from the dreamland of false reality to see the seemingly "normal" distortions of this life, such as death, pain, and suffering, as unnatural. Such an awakening, Flannery believes, will help us to see once again the role of redemption in our lives.

Perhaps looking at one of Flannery's stories will provide an example for us to help explain the role that redemption plays in her thought. In the story "Greenleaf", Mrs. May is plagued by the presence of an escaped bull on her property, which happens to belong to her tenants, the Greenleaf family. While Mr. Greenleaf is a sorry excuse for a worker, she requires his help, because her own sons are unwilling to assist

her in the farm labor. There is a great tension between Mrs. May and the Greenleaf family: Mrs. May's sons are lazy and have not done much with their lives, while the Greenleafs' sons are accomplished and distinguished. When the Greenleaf sons fail to capture the bull, however, Mrs. May threatens to force Mr. Greenleaf to shoot him, lest he start mating with her own stock. When she and Mr. Greenleaf drive out to the field to shoot the bull, Mrs. May is tragically gored by it.

At the surface level, we see only the tragedy of the story. Mrs. May is a withered soul, seeking to find love, but finding instead only mockery in her own sons. She says of herself: "I'm the victim. I've always been the victim."⁹ She is a hard worker who can find no one to help her; she feels very alone in the midst of her anguish. And then, to add fatal insult to perceived injury, she is gored by the rogue bull on her property and loses her life. Clearly it would be easy to miss the "hopefulness" of this story if we only looked at the literal level. Yet the genius of Flannery lies beneath the literal interpretation. This genius is present from the very beginning of the story, in which we can see the power of redemption working in Mrs. May's life. The story opens with the following: "The bull, silvered in the moonlight, stood under it, his head raised as if he listened—like some patient god come down to woo her—for a stir inside the room."¹⁰ There is a "head-wreath that he had ripped loose for himself caught in the tips of his horns",¹¹ and again, "The bull, gaunt and long-legged, was standing about four feet from her, chewing calmly like an uncouth country suitor."¹² The bull is described as a lover, who is waiting to woo his beloved; the bull has come to woo Mrs. May. Interpreted allegorically, Christ himself has come to woo Mrs. May, wearing a

crown of thorns (see John 19:2), waiting for a response of love to his beckoning call of hope and redemption.

In the scene that leads to Mrs. May's death, we continue to see the bull presented as a lover. "He was crossing the pasture toward her at a slow gallop, a gay almost rocking gait as if he were overjoyed to find her again."¹³ When Mrs. May realizes what is happening, it is almost too late: she realizes that he is coming for her, and she cannot move. She is frozen and transfixed—in a way, she is absorbed by his passionate love for her. When the bull and Mrs. May meet,



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"one of his horns sank until it pierced her heart and the other curved around her side and held her in an unbreakable grip."¹⁴ The horn pierces her heart; Christ finally enters into Mrs. May's hardened heart, and her

blood—her whole being—pours forth from her, for she can no longer contain it. When Mr. Greenleaf finally reaches her, too late to save her life, he finds her, "bent over whispering some last discovery into the animal's ear."¹⁵ What is that discovery? We can only wonder, but perhaps it is the words of acceptance, words surrendering everything to her divine lover.

The shocking nature of Flannery's "Greenleaf", and indeed, many of her stories, is really only a portrayal of something of which Christians should already be aware: Christ's action in their lives and his eternal and abiding love for us. Yet, our modern society has turned us away from this love, which is why Flannery refuses to write merely sentimental novels and sees the need for the element of shock. If we remain on the level of the sentimental, we shall never re-discover the passionate love of Christ and his desire for redemption for us. The modern reader is, according to Flannery, "very busy always looking for some new Doctor Pangloss who will assure him that this is the best of all possible worlds".¹⁶ This, however, is not the true "operation of grace"¹⁷ that we see in our lives, and that Flannery presents in her novels. Flannery believes there is something within us demanding the redemptive act, which is something that man has forgotten: "he has forgotten the price of redemption".¹⁸ The Catholic writer, then, must use shocking imagery—such as a bull gorging his beloved—to remind our apathetic souls about the price of redemption, the price of sacrifice: the price of Christ giving everything for his beloved, and the price of his creation giving everything back to him. In the stories of Flannery O'Connor, then, we find the "beginning of vision",¹⁹ that is, the beginning of our eternal life with Christ in Heaven—if we can only read with the eyes of faith, by the grace of Jesus Christ.

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References

1. Flannery O'Connor, "The Catholic Novelist in the South," in *Collected Works*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1988), p. 854. All citations from Flannery O'Connor's works will be taken from this source.

2. "The Church and the Fiction Writer," p. 809.

3. "The Fiction Writer and His Country," pp. 804-5.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 805.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*, p. 806.

8. As Pope Benedict XVI explains, "Indeed, an essential function of genuine beauty, as emphasized by Plato, is that it gives man a healthy 'shock,' it draws him out of himself, wrenches him away from resignation and from being content with the humdrum—it even makes him suffer, piercing him like a dart, but in so doing it 'reawakens' him, opening afresh the eyes of

his heart and mind, giving him wings, carrying him aloft" (Address to Artists, November 21, 2009).

9. "Greenleaf," p. 516.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 501.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*, p. 502.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 523.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, p. 524.

16. "The Catholic Novelist in the South," p. 862.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*, p. 863.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 864.

New Voices

New Poetry in English



N. S. Boone

They've Outlawed Sex in Europe

They've outlawed sex in Europe.
It's easy to see why—
It's violent, patriarchal,
And inappropriate for the eye.

They've outlawed food in Europe.
It's barbaric that we still
Butcher plants and animals
Instead of taking pills.

They've outlawed jobs in Europe.
No employer has the right
To hold its workers hostage
With a paycheck day and night.

Universal Basic Income
Is now the people's creed.
With free pills, a roof, and internet
What else do they need?

They've outlawed thought in Europe.
Just know that you are equal.

All the studies say the same thing:
Discrimination is thinking's sequel.

They've outlawed death in Europe.
How nice it now can be.
If the body quits its functions
You'll be hooked up to a screen

So that you'll be only consciousness—
No more bloated, bloody corpse
To hang around the neck of Mind
(Footnote: Hegel is our source).

They've outlawed life in Europe.
It's all just too obtuse.
Just imagine how much one life takes,
Whether codger or papoose.

Life is just too selfish.
Humans are energy hogs.
The blue earth goes round without us
On the galaxy's gears and cogs.