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Evan Howell
Virginia Commonwealth University

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'Some Can't Be That Simple':

Flannery O'Connor's Debt to French Symbolism

Evan Howell

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partial fulfillment for the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
In
English

Dr. Katherine Nash, Chair

Dr. Jason Coats

Dr. Les Harrison

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List of Abbreviations for O'Connor works cited in-text:

CS – The Complete Stories

HB – The Habit of Being (collected letters)

MM – Mystery and Manners (collected speeches and articles)

Abstract

In this thesis, I trace the influence of French Symbolist poetry on the works of Flannery O'Connor. Many of O'Connor's influences are well-known and documented, including Catholicism, the South, modern fiction, and her battle with lupus. However, I argue that Symbolism, via its influence on Modernist literature, is another major influence. In particular, I focus on several aspects of O'Connor's writing: the recurrence of the same symbol across multiple works, the central location of symbols in several stories, the use of private symbols of the author's invention, and use of symbol, rather than language, to convey transcendence. Aided by the scholarship of critics such as Richard Giannone, Laurence Porter, and Margaret Early Whitt, I argue that there is much in the aesthetic of Flannery O'Connor to suggest that her writing is, in part, a legacy of the French Symbolists.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Flannery O'Connor had a problem. She was a religious writer in an age that had discarded religion. The twentieth-century's humanism and empiricism, so celebrated by her peers, held little interest for her. "God must be in all my work," she writes in an early journal entry (Fitzgerald 13), and this remains the case until her untimely death at 39. To be sure, O'Connor was aware of the pitfalls of her vocation, and she believed that many religious writers failed to properly meld belief with art, once referring to Catholic fiction as "that large body of pious trash for which we have so long been famous" (MM 180). For her own part, she avoided such a fate. By any objective measure, O'Connor was remarkably successful – widely published and awarded in her lifetime, her posthumous *Collected Works* won the National Book Award, and a half century after her death her writing is still read, taught, and studied across the globe.

It is counterintuitive; how does a writer who goes against the grain of modern thought produce works that are studied and admired in modern institutions? The answer lies in the *way* that O'Connor goes against the grain. Without diluting the religious aspect of her work, she also appropriates the aesthetics of Modernist fiction, and in so doing manages to strike a balance that few writers can, creating work that is iconoclastic, yet in conversation with her contemporaries. And of all the tools in her Modernist toolbox, none is more important than the symbol. Symbolism allows O'Connor to incorporate religious meaning in her stories without making them pious. Instead of moralizing to her readers, she charges them with a sense of mystery.

In addition to making her work palatable to her modern audience, O'Connor's use of symbols also reveals an unexpected and as-yet unrevealed influence: the Symbolist movement of late nineteenth-century French poetry. These poets – Paul Verlaine, Stephane Mallarmé, and Charles Baudelaire in particular – did in their time what O'Connor did decades later: they used

symbols to convey transcendence. Their impact on O'Connor is indirect and not nearly as obvious as her more well-documented influences, but I will argue that it is integral to her artistic and religious project. The Symbolists provided a Modernist framework which allowed her to convey transcendence to an age that had outgrown it. Indeed, in reading O'Connor's fiction, one should view the stories less as a collection of events and more as a collection of symbols. She writes that "the type of mind that can understand good fiction...is willing to have its sense of mystery deepened by contact with reality, and its sense of reality deepened by contact with mystery" (MM 79). It is her reliance on symbols that so intertwines mystery and reality. The concrete and quotidian – eyes and eyeglasses, animals, the sun, trees – hint at transcendent truths. She relies on Symbolist technique to undertake the difficult work of making spirituality tangible, revealing the sacred in ways that are oblique, yet powerful.

In order to understand Symbolism's place in her writing, one must first understand O'Connor's other influences. Her Catholic faith is the obvious starting place, since it permeates everything she wrote. According to her close friend and literary executor Sally Fitzgerald, O'Connor "was a writer fully conscious of wanting above all to be, if a writer at all, a true artist, *ad majorem Dei gloriam*. More specifically yet, to the glory of the Trinitarian God, Father Incarnate Son, and Holy Spirit" (Fitzgerald 6). And in O'Connor's own words: "...all my own experience has been that of the writer who believes, again in Pascal's words, in the 'God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and not of the philosophers and scholars'" (MM 161). In the Flannery O'Connor story, Catholic faith is the foundation for all else. This is a faith that finds God to be the ultimate reality, and each story features characters on a collision course with this fact. Mrs. McIntyre learns this by virtue of a fatal tractor accident ("The Displaced Person"), Mrs. Turpin

through a vision in the sky (“Revelation”), five-year-old Harry when he drowns (“The River”), Sheppard from his son’s suicide (“The Lame Shall Enter First”). All of these events, horrifying as they may be, point to O’Connor’s Catholic faith. They are her way of teaching her self-willed characters humility and grace, values central to her work because they are central to her religious faith. In her words, “The artist penetrates the concrete world in order to find at its depths the image of its source, the image of ultimate reality” (MM 157). For her that reality was God, and her fictive story-worlds reflect her faith.

Connected to her Catholicism is her interest in the writings of fourth-century ascetic monks, another prominent influence. In a letter to friend she writes, “These desert fathers interest me very much” (HB 382) and their lives and ideas certainly inform her fiction. Richard Giannone’s book *Flannery O’Connor, Hermit Novelist* details their influence, in particular the idea of the desert as a place of cleansing and renewal. “A Good Man is Hard to Find” provides one example, of many, in which O’Connor employs this motif. The Grandmother’s transformation – from selfish and controlling to loving and grace-filled – comes about in a forbidding, arid landscape after the family has crashed their car on a deserted road. When she enjoyed the comforts of modern conveniences, houses and cars and paved roads, she had no time for anyone’s will but her own. By the story’s end she is stripped of these things, sitting in a “red gutted ditch” surrounded by “tall and dark and deep” woods (CS 125), and it is then that she transforms, reaching out in love to the man about to kill her. The desert monks, in their experience with solitude and deprivation, inform O’Connor’s fiction and, indeed, hardly a character of hers undergoes significant change without finding himself in a desert of some fashion, either literal or figurative.

In the more concrete realm, life circumstances also influenced her fiction. Geography is the most obvious example, as nearly all her stories take place in the South, and the ones that do not, such as “Judgment Day,” feature characters who want to return there. Her ear for dialect, her knowledge of regional mores, and her practical understanding of how things work, farms in particular, all come from her Georgia upbringing. Of her regionalism, O’Connor said, “To call yourself a Georgia writer is certainly to declare a limitation, but one which, like all limitations, is a gateway to reality (MM 54). The limitations she refers to are reflected in her characters: poverty, illiteracy, bigotry, xenophobia. She takes the most damning stereotypes about her region and runs with them, and in so doing creates not caricatures but dynamic people grappling with the universal mystery of existence.

In addition to geography, O’Connor’s lifelong battle with lupus also finds its way into her writing. Because of this condition, she was forced to live under the care of her mother for much of her adult life, a situation that repeatedly manifests itself in her fiction. The most common domestic arrangement in her writing is an adult child dependent upon a single mother; this is found in “Everything that Rises Must Converge,” “The Enduring Chill,” “The Comforts of Home,” “Greenleaf,” and “Good Country People.” “The Enduring Chill” is a particularly good example, centering on a young artist forced to abandon New York for the South because of illness, which is exactly what O’Connor did. In all of these situations the intellectual temperament of the child is at odds with the practical, home-spun ways of the mother, a situation that plays out (more mildly) in O’Connor’s letters when she describes her own mother’s bewilderment at the stories she writes.

Lupus affected her more deeply than simply suggesting character types, though. Indeed, her writing’s preoccupation with illness and death is largely a result of her condition. She came

to view suffering as redemptive, thanks to the writings of fellow Catholic Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. As Kathleen Spaltro writes in “When We Dead Awaken: Flannery O’Connor’s Debt to Lupus,” Chardin’s writing “gave her a way of seeing disability and death as mysterious but necessary catalysts for her evolution as a spiritual being” (33). It is easy to see how O’Connor applies this theory not only to herself but to her characters. Hulga Hopewell’s missing leg (“Good Country People”) provides her the tragedy she needs to receive spiritual enlightenment. Asbury Fox’s mysterious ailment (“The Enduring Chill”) weakens him both physically and spiritually so that when the Holy Spirit descends in the story’s final paragraph, he will no longer resist. O’Connor expounds upon the benefits of illness in her letters: “In a sense sickness is a place, more instructive than a long trip to Europe, and it’s always a place where there’s no company, where nobody can follow. Sickness before death is a very appropriate thing and I think those who don’t have it miss one of God’s mercies” (HB 163).

The influences recorded so far are personal: religion, sickness, geography. O’Connor was also influenced by the time period in which she lived; literary Modernism was significant for her. To be sure, she does not wholly embrace the movement. In particular, she decries modern literature’s value system, which she viewed as too humanistic and subjective:

“...in twentieth century fiction it increasingly happens that a meaningless, absurd world impinges upon the sacred consciousness of author or character; author and character seldom now go out to explore and penetrate a world in which the sacred is reflected” (MM 158).

This is a predictable point of contention, considering her own writing’s preoccupation with human wickedness. Furthermore, she does not participate in any of the experimentation common to Modernism. She never employs stream-of-consciousness, multiple points of view, or non-

linear narrative. And while some Modernist writing seems to be an exercise in ambiguity, O'Connor strove for the utmost in clarity. In her speech "Novelist and Believer," she states that the main job of a novelist is to "make everything – even an ultimate concern – as concrete as possible" (MM 155).

Still, in reading widely and maintaining scrupulous correspondence with her contemporaries, O'Connor absorbed the tenets of twentieth-century fiction. John Sykes describes her as "an heir and proponent of prose techniques developed by writers such as Gustave Flaubert, Henry James... and James Joyce (Sykes 125). Her letters cite all three of these as influences, as well as Joseph Conrad and Virginia Woolf. One of the prose techniques common to this era is the writer's reluctance to be didactic (Levenson 56-7), which is certainly a tenet that O'Connor adheres to. Her work can be difficult, with meaning communicated through inference and symbol but rarely stated directly.

Her treatment of character is another example of Modernism's influence, in particular characters' lack of agency, their seeming to be playthings of forces they cannot comprehend. Michael Levenson writes that "the dissolving of the Cartesian self...(and) the abrasion of the rational ego is a marker of high Modernism" (83). O'Connor's characters are not in control and they hardly ever understand themselves. Much of the humor in her work comes from making light of their self-delusion: Ruby Turpin thanking Jesus for her good fortune right before getting hit in the eye with a textbook ("Revelation"), Hulga's intellectual vanity laid bare by the Bible salesman as he makes off with her wooden leg ("Good Country People"), Asbury's humiliation at the hands of a deaf, senile priest ("The Enduring Chill"). If she rejected the movement's humanism, she certainly embraced the flip side of the coin – its focus on human brokenness.

Her chosen medium is also decidedly modern. Levenson describes the importance of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, which "brought the short story *collection* toward a new structural coherence" (231). The stories in this book feature "reappearing characters" and "recurrent locations," both of which also characterize O'Connor's work, giving it a similar unity. While she never employs exactly the same character across stories, such as George Willard in Anderson's book, there certainly are reappearing types. One is the sullen child who lives with parents into adulthood, seen in "Greenleaf," "The Comforts of Home," "The Enduring Chill," "Everything That Rises Must Converge," and "Good Country People." Another is the proud farm woman who manages to keep up her property despite the shiftlessness of everyone around her. Ruby Turpin is one, as well as Mrs. May ("Greenleaf"), Mrs. McIntyre ("The Displaced Person"), and Ms. Hopewell ("Good Country People"). Hazel Motes' landlady at the end of *Wise Blood* also fits into this category, who "felt that the money she paid out in taxes returned to all the worthless pockets in the world...(and) she felt justified in getting any of it back that she could" (O'Connor 218). This sentiment reflects another example of the unity of O'Connor's stories; not only do O'Connor's characters share similar characteristics, they also have the same flaw: pride. Furthermore, O'Connor's stories deal with this pride in the same way, by giving it a catastrophic blow – either physical or spiritual – that serves to give the character the contrition necessary to repent. Whether it is Mrs. May being gored by a bull or Mrs. Turpin being called a "warthog" from hell, the flaw is the same and the solution is the same. In her characters, motifs, and situations, O'Connor's work displays the kind of coherence that marks the modern short story collection.

All these influences of O'Connor's are widely known and documented. Indeed, it is hard to conceive of her without them, Catholicism and the South in particular. However, they do not explain her entirely, and a large gap that still remains can be filled by the Symbolists. Of O'Connor's literary aspirations, perhaps most important to her was the depiction of transcendence. She was a writer who worked to portray an Ideal (capital "I"). In her words: "The artist penetrates the concrete world in order to find at its depths the image of its source, the image of ultimate reality" (MM 157). Her artistic project then is not merely the description of events or objects, but the revealing of an Ideal beneath them. This is no easy task, and her solution to this dilemma is a heavy reliance on symbols. Instead of describing the divine head-on, she will sidle up to it, suggest it, make obscure connections that will nudge her reader in the right direction. Her documented influences explain this symbolic tendency in part, but not fully. Catholicism no doubt was instructive, as she was faced with symbolism every time she took Communion or gazed upon an image of the cross. Also, her Modernist readings taught her the importance of suggestion, the need to trust that readers will pick up on subtlety.

However, these influences do not fully explain the manner in which she used symbols, nor the central role they play in many of her stories. In her stories, and with her symbols, O'Connor is communicating to a hostile audience. The majority of her readers do not share her beliefs, a fact of which she is well aware:

"The problem of the novelist who wishes to write about a man's encounter with this God is how he shall make the experience – which is both natural and supernatural – understandable, and credible, to his reader. In any age this would be a problem, but in our own, it is a well-nigh insurmountable one. Today's audience is one in which religious feeling has become...vaporous and sentimental" (MM 161).

Her task is twofold: to communicate her religious beliefs to an unbelieving audience, and to do so in a way that fits with the accepted literary practices of her day. To state her Ideal outright, to simply articulate her vision, might turn off already-skeptical readers, not to mention violate her own artistic ideals.

Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Mallarmé faced a similar dilemma, as the French verse of their time was at a crisis point. The nineteenth-century had begun with a period of Neoclassicism, in which French poets confidently strove to “rejuvenat(e) traditional forms with new ideas” (Porter 3). This was followed by a Romantic period that found poetry in opposition to mainstream values, resulting in “the reemergence of satire” and the inclusion of “familiar and coarse locutions into what had traditionally been a solemn situation” (Porter 5). Different in aim and tone, what these two movements shared was a confidence in language. One cannot hope to revive ancient forms without a belief in one’s own facility with words, nor does one employ satire without the expectation that the intended target will feel its sting. As Porter writes of the latter movement: “In the Romantic system, then, values have become problematical, but the act of communication still has not” (6).

But as the century progressed, communication too became problematic. Poets lost faith in the ability of words to signify, leaving them with a seemingly insurmountable problem, akin to a carpenter losing faith in hammers and nails. Their dilemma stemmed from a relativistic worldview; the Symbolists “saw all institutions as relative to time and place and circumstance and therefore as delusional” (Porter 8) and what is language but one of these institutions? Compounding this problem is the fact that Symbolist poetry seeks to portray the transcendent; they were attempting to describe immutable truths with a tool (language) that is as fickle as

human social and political arrangements. Porter writes that “despair of the success of the communicative process” is what “characterizes Symbolism proper” (11).

To be clear, “Symbolist” is as murky and disputed a term as any other aesthetic label. Historians disagree both about the definition of the word and the artists to whom it should be applied. Porter describes four major schools of thought regarding Symbolism, and only Mallarmé is factored into each. In his introduction to *The Crisis of French Symbolism*, he struggles to find an inclusive definition: “One wonders, then, what if anything the representatives of those contrasting persuasions share” (Porter 7). Musicality is prevalent only in the work of Verlaine, synesthesia only in the work of Baudelaire. Mallarmé’s poems are tightly organized while those of Arthur Rimbaud, another prominent Symbolist, are chaotic. Attempting to wed these poets stylistically is like herding cats. To unify them, one must consider their aim, not their means. They aim for the transcendent, seeing “the poet’s mission (as seeing) beyond the flux of appearances in order to apprehend the essential” (Porter 9). Of the paradox in which they find themselves – tasked with this important job and stuck with such a quotidian tool as language – they respond in several ways. Cratylishm is one, the notion that language itself has divine signification, that words are their own form of transcendence. Mallarmé in particular is known for his reverence for the roots of language. He advocated “(giving) a purer meaning to the words of the tribe” (Porter 10). Another response is to lose faith the entire concept of communication, as “all the major Symbolist poets in France underwent a crisis of loss of faith in the communicative process” (Porter 11). Considering that Symbolism is “a poetry of failure” – failure to fully explain, failure to be understood – despair seems only natural for its practitioners (Porter 11-12).

However, the response with the most relevance to Flannery O'Connor is that of suggestion. Lacking faith in words to directly invoke their divine visions, Symbolists remained hopeful "that the beyond could be intuited, suggested, indirectly evoked" (Porter 11). Despite their inherent cynicism, Verlaine, Baudelaire, and Mallarmé all have this hope, and each man deals with it in his own way. It is an oversimplification to say that these poets rely solely on symbolism to suggest meaning (just as it oversimplifies to say that O'Connor only uses symbols to portray the Divine). However, their title is no misnomer. They do employ symbols in their writing, especially when trying to convey their Ideals. Each of these men has an Ideal – a unique Ideal for each poet – that captures him, and for all three, the task of rendering this vision in language proves difficult. For the purposes of this study of O'Connor's work, the crucial Ideal in Baudelaire's work is the state of infant dependency (Porter 135). Likewise, Mallarmé's, as it pertains to O'Connor, may be said to be inspiration (Porter 40), while Verlaine's Ideal is fleeting moments of inexpressible beauty. Each poet seeks to express these concepts, and in so doing runs into the same paradox: "the words available for embodying a transcendent poetic vision are conventions" (Porter 12). Furthermore, even if they could articulate themselves perfectly, such directness does not appeal to their aesthetic. In Mallarmé's words: "To *name* an object is to suppress three-quarters of the enjoyment of the poem, which consists in guessing little by little: to *suggest* it, that is my dream" (Porter 11). So they rely on symbols to communicate their visions of transcendence. And half a century later, Flannery O'Connor does the same in her short fiction.

She does not seem to be deliberately responding to or emulating the Symbolist poets. In over 500 pages of her collected letters, she mentions none of these three men, nor does she betray any knowledge of their movement. However, she mentions symbolism (lowercase "s")

quite a bit. It is one of the fundamental principles of her craft, which she frequently makes clear, as in this excerpt from the speech “Novelist and Believer”: “The good novelist not only finds a symbol for feeling, he finds a symbol and a way of lodging it which tells the intelligent reader whether this feeling is adequate or inadequate, whether it is moral or immoral, whether it is good or evil” (MM 156). O’Connor writes fiction in much the same way the Symbolists write poetry. She employs a pattern; symbols are not dropped in at random. Instead, they are recurring and integral to the entire meaning of the work.

Flannery O’Connor’s use of Symbolism was not acquired by an encounter with French poetry (as was her contemporary William Faulkner’s), but she is nonetheless in their debt because of their profound influence on the Modernist fiction she loved so much. Levenson writes that Symbolism “saw ...the begetting of attitudes, predilections, sensibilities” (26). In “The Symbolist Novel: Huysmans to Malraux,” Melvin Friedman writes that “The novels of James, Proust, Joyce, Conrad, Faulkner, and Virginia Woolf are in some sense fictional inheritances from French Symbolist poetry” (453). These writers were less concerned with plot than their predecessors had been and were “more willing to fragment narrative and to chop up experience into small blocks of time, connected through repeated images and symbols rather than exterior events” (453).

To be sure, O’Connor does not employ the narrative gymnastics of Joyce or Faulkner. Her stories are linear, but she relies on symbolism because of the limitations she places on herself. She “fragments” in a different way, by refusing to give the totality of her characters’ lives; often, it is only a glimpse: a bus ride (“Everything that Rises Must Converge”), a car trip (“A Good Man is Hard to Find”), a couple months’ convalescence (“The Enduring Chill”), and, in an extreme example, a walk up a flight of stairs (“A Stroke of Good Fortune”). Because of

these restrictions, as well as the limitations of her ever-present third-person narrator, she relies on symbols to communicate (or rather, suggest) meaning. In describing *We'll to the Woods No More* as an influential predecessor to the Symbolist novel, Friedman notes that this book is remarkable for “suggesting a way of writing a novel which has less to do with the development of event and character than with the accumulation of image and symbolic device” (455). This does not exactly describe O'Connor, for whom character development was essential, but her work certainly does rely on the repetition of image and symbol.

Before proceeding further, it is important to note the difference between symbolism and Symbolism. The use of symbol is a common literary technique, found across genres, cultures, and time periods. In *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, Arthur Symons writes that symbolism is found “under one disguise or another, in every great imaginative writer” (Murfin and Supriya 274). And considering that language itself is involved in an intricate play of signification, one could argue that symbolism characterizes *all* human verbal communication. The Bedford Glossary of Literary Terms defines *symbolism* as “the presence, in a work or body of works, of suggestive associations giving rise to incremental, implied meaning” (Murfin and Supriya 472). Such associations frequently trade on commonly held assumptions. Darkness symbolizing evil, the cross symbolizing Christianity, a fox symbolizing cunning – these are public symbols that require little explanation on the part of the author. In contrast, the same glossary defines *Symbolism* as:

“a literary movement that flourished in late-nineteenth-century France...(which) held that writers create and use subjective, or private (rather than conventional, or public) symbols in order to convey very personal and intense emotional experiences and reactions” (473).

Most of the references in Symbolism are unique to the artist. Paul Verlaine's repeated use of birds requires knowledge of his oeuvre to be understood, as does Mallarmé's fascination with blank spaces and Baudelaire's with breasts. Furthermore, these symbols repeat themselves across poems in the works of these authors. They gain weight with each mention, as the reader acquires context and is better able to understand each poet's private language of images.

Another characteristic of Symbolism is its affinity for the transcendent. During the movement's heyday, Jean Moreas published a manifesto declaring that the Symbolists' goal was to "give expression to 'primordial Ideas'...not by mere description...(but) by employing concrete symbols that have 'esoteric affinities' with Ideas in a transcendent world" (Murfin and Supriya 274). Symbolist poetry is full of grand ambitions. In defining the movement, *Literary Terms: A Dictionary* attributes this bent to a Platonic influence, as the poets are hinting at an ideal other-world (Beckson and Ganz 274).

To the reader of Flannery O'Connor, this all sounds familiar: repeated images, concrete objects with sacred significance, the idea that our world is merely the shadow of a more perfect one. Her methods are remarkably similar to those of the French Symbolists, and I will argue that she inherited these methods from Modernist fiction, Joyce, Faulkner, Conrad, and James in particular. These writers in turn were composing under the influence of the Symbolists, whose ideas had permeated much of early twentieth-century fiction. In describing twentieth-century short fiction, Levenson writes "here we see another, perhaps surprising legacy of Symbolism...the style of evocation – of a universe of signification beyond the terse speech of the story – recapitulates a later, Modernist Symbolism" (231). In the craft and ethos of the Symbolists, Flannery O'Connor found a vehicle for her own unique, anachronistic vision. Indeed, an understanding of Symbolist values provides a new way of reading O'Connor's stories,

one in which the accumulation of symbols is just as important as the chain of events. She receives much attention for the more salient aspects of her fiction – especially its violence – but the perceptive reader should also be able to discern the still, small voice of the symbol.

Chapter 2: The Short Stories

Brevity is one of Flannery O'Connor's strengths. All but two of her works of fiction are short stories, and even the novels are brief, as if she attempted a short story and then got carried away. O'Connor's reliance on symbols is in part a result of her chosen medium. Short fiction – like poetry – must accomplish a great deal in a compressed space. The writer must suggest much that could be more clearly articulated in a longer work, and the symbol is ideal for the writer seeking depth within a limited space. So, O'Connor has the restrictions of word count pushing her towards symbolism, in addition to her religious and artistic ethos. A thorough examination of O'Connor's short stories will reveal numerous Symbolist tendencies: the accumulation of a single image, the repetition of an image across various works, and the central role of symbols in stories, helping to decipher characters and events.

Like the French poets, O'Connor's symbolism does not usually occur in a single, climatic appearance. Instead, her symbols occur throughout the story, increasing in significance. "Greenleaf," from *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, is a good representation of this approach. Indeed, the central metaphor shows up in the first sentence and the last, with significant appearances in between. The story opens with a rogue bull standing silently outside the protagonist's window. Mrs. May is one of O'Connor's stock characters – the proud, self-reliant farm woman – and "Greenleaf" is the story of her battle with the bull and its recalcitrant owners, her hired help the Greenleaf family. However, the bull, not the people, is the core of this story, and in the first paragraph he is revealed as a Christ-symbol (Whitt 122). As he chews on Mrs. May's shrubs a "hedge-wreath that he had ripped loose for himself caught in the tips of his horns" (CS 311). If the crown is not evidence enough of the Christ symbolism, it soon becomes a crown of thorns; shortly after, he "lowered his head and shook it and the wreath slipped down to

the base of his horns where it looked like a menacing prickly crown” (CS 312). As Mrs. May furiously gets out of bed, prepared to fetch Mr. Greenleaf, she reflects on the relentless nature of the animal:

“She had been conscious in her sleep of a steady rhythmic chewing as if something were eating one wall of the house. She had been aware that whatever it was has been eating as long as she had had the place and had eaten everything from the beginning of her fence line up to the house and now was eating the house and calmly with the same steady rhythm would continue through the house, eating her and the boys, and then on eating everything...” (CS 312)

This is a recurring theme of O’Connor’s, the inexorable nature of Christ in his pursuit of potential followers. Of course, Mrs. May does not yet understand it as such. She thinks of the bull as a threat to her property, which in turn is a threat to her very being. The farm is an extension of herself, and her stewardship of it is what keeps her separate from God. She is a proud woman – proud of her farm and disdainful of “shiftless” people who do not live up to her standards of productivity; in fact, she thinks of her own hired help as “scrub-human” (CS 317). The Christ-bull that chews at the hedge is actually chewing at her conceit, slowly breaking her down until she is humble enough to receive him (Giannone 166).

In the Symbolist manner, the religious undertones surrounding the bull continue. When an indignant Mrs. May informs Mr. Greenleaf of the bull, he is not surprised: “Done already been here three days” (CS 313), a hint at Christ’s resurrection which comes shortly after the crown-of-thorns reference to the crucifixion. Then readers are told of Mrs. May’s first encounter with Mrs. Greenleaf, occurring when the latter was out in the woods, praying loudly over newspaper accounts of tragedies. She says “Jesus” loudly and it startles Mrs. May in a very

peculiar way: “The sound was so piercing that she felt as if some violent unleashed force had broken out of the ground and was *charging towards her*” (CS 316, emphasis mine). Jesus’ name disturbs her, though it is not unfamiliar; Mrs. May is “a good Christian woman with a large respect for religion, though she did not, of course, believe any of it was true” (CS 316). She confronts Mrs. Greenleaf, who then cries out, in a bit of foreshadowing, “Jesus, stab me in the heart!” (CS 317).

The story concludes with Mrs. May and Mr. Greenleaf in the pasture. She has driven him out there with the determination that he shoot the bull, and as she waits to hear gunshots from the woods, she lets her guard down for the first time in the story. After reflecting that she “had been working continuously for fifteen years,” she lays back on the hood of her car “to rest before she began working again” (CS 332). And it is at this moment, when her prideful striving is still, that the bull emerges for the last time, speeding toward her from the edge of her pasture. It is a happy charge, he runs with “a gay almost rocking gait as if her were overjoyed to find her again,” and she watches “in a freezing *unbelief*” (CS 333, emphasis mine). When the bull reaches her, Mrs. Greenleaf’s prayer is answered as Mrs. May’s heart is pierced. She “had the look of a person whose sight has been suddenly restored” and her last moments are spent in a tender embrace with the bull “so that she seemed...to be bent over whispering some last discovery into the animal’s ear” (CS 334).

Mrs. Greenleaf has undergone what O’Connor felt to be the ultimate in human experience: communion with the Divine. God has broken down her pride, pierced her heart, and filled her with inexpressible joy. This is O’Connor’s Ideal, but she does not want to approach it directly. In fact, contained within this story is her idea of the modern response to unambiguous religiosity. Upon encountering Mrs. Greenleaf’s emotional prayer sessions in the woods, Mrs.

May rebukes her harshly: “Jesus... would be *ashamed* of you. He would tell you to get up from there this instant and go wash your children’s clothes!” (CS 317). Mrs. May is O’Connor’s stand in for secular modernity. Were she to plainly depict a religious conversion, she believes that her readers would similarly admonish her. So in “Greenleaf” she veils it, using recurrent symbolism to convey her Ideal in a way consistent with modernity’s (and her own) artistic standards. Of the Symbolists, René Wellek writes, “They wanted words not merely to state but to suggest; they wanted to use metaphors, allegories, and symbols not only as decorations but as organizing principles of their poems” (264). This statement can also be applied to O’Connor, for whom the bull is no mere decoration. He is the heart of this story, radiating meaning to the reader with his every appearance, slowly growing in significance until his final confrontation with Mrs. May seems to be a foregone conclusion.

The bull is also an example of the type of private symbol for which the Symbolists are known. The idea of representing Christ with an animal is not new – a lion is the most popular such example – but the use of a bull certainly is. Were the bovine in question a powerful specimen, then the Christ-connection would be easier for readers to make; after all, a healthy bull conjures up notions of strength and ferocity similar to that of a lion. However, this bull is rangy and ragged, further complicating matters. This is a symbol that O’Connor must explicate in the story, which she does, as we have seen. It is a symbol of her own making, in the Symbolist tradition.

Flannery O’Connor’s writing resembles the work of the French Symbolists because they are concerned with the same problem – the difficulty of expressing transcendence within a conventional medium. Symbolism is one of the few answers for such an intractable dilemma. In

the work of both O'Connor and the Symbolists, we see writers pushing language to its limits, using the power of image and suggestion to communicate with the reader on a visceral level. The Symbolists, like O'Connor, are single-minded; they are, all of them, happily, gloriously narrow, entranced by their visions, eager to proselytize and unconcerned if this zealotry alienates the reader.

Paul Verlaine is an example of this, and his artistic project foreshadows O'Connor's fiction, even though their Ideals are quite different. While she is concerned with the eternal and immutable, Verlaine's preoccupation is with the transitory. He loves *moments*, and laments that pleasant ones must end. Nowhere is this articulated more clearly than in "The Rosy Hearth," which describes a number of idyllic scenarios – "the rosy hearth," "the hour of steaming tea and banished books," "the sweetness of the evening at an end" – then concludes with the following: "Oh, all these things, in unrelenting flight/ My dream pursues through all the vain delays/ Impatient of the weeks, mad at the days!" (Verlaine 275). The speaker has no use for the normal, workaday hours of life; they are merely an interruption from the transcendence he feels in the ideal moments. A great deal of Verlaine's poetry is an attempt to capture this transcendence, and the intensity of his writing strains at the boundaries imposed by language, resulting in a reliance on symbol. And as different as the two writers are, Verlaine's cumulative method of symbolism (to coin a phrase) predicts the type of writing that will become commonplace in the likes of Joyce, Faulkner, and O'Connor. Images recur, both in the same poem and across a body of work. Seen once, they signify little, but with each mention they gather weight.

"Moonlight" imagines a serene situation typical of Verlaine: a nighttime party whose attendants "celebrate in minor strain/ triumphant love, effective enterprise" (Verlaine 267). Their revelries are tinged with a minor-key sadness because of their enjoyment's inevitable end; the

partygoers “have an air of knowing all is vain.” “Muted,” from the same collection, imagines another fleeting, beautiful moment, this one romantic. The speaker and his lover lie under a tree, “tranquil in the twilight dense” (Verlaine 271). He then implores her, “Let your heart melt into mine/ And your soul reach out to me.” And once again, this happy moment is tinged with regret, “as Night . . . shall her solemn shadow fling/ Touching voice of our despair.”

Verlaine is a gifted writer and the language in both poems is exquisite. However, the passion he describes is a deep, gut-wrenching feeling, and words can only do so much. In trying to properly capture his Ideal, he runs into the limits of his medium, and it is here that he turns to the symbol. In both poems, near the end, the reader encounters a bird. The last stanza of “Moonlight” features “birds upon the tree” that are “(made) to dream” by the moonlight. Similarly, the last line of “Muted” features a nightingale singing over the two lovers. The image of birds suggests the preoccupation with transience that characterizes so much of his writing. They are a living embodiment of the moments he loves and idealizes, beautiful and fickle, any enjoyment of them tempered by the knowledge of their evanescence.

And as one surveys Verlaine’s work, birds occur again and again, juxtaposed with images of “rosy hearth” beauty. “Before Your Light Quite Fail,” which one might guess to be Verlaine from the title alone, features a lark rising “to meet the sun” (274) in the fleeting moments before said light is no more. “The Trees’ Reflection,” true to its title, describes how the trees’ reflection “in the misty stream/ Dies off in the livid steam,” an event mourned by the trees’ tenants – “the tender wood-doves” (276). “Brussels” is about an autumn landscape seen in “moody languor” from a carriage ride (277). It is a scene both romantic (“slowly turns the gold to red”) and temporary (“hills and fences hurry by”), and over it all “some feeble birdling wails” (277). In “Nevermore” the speaker walks with a young woman in “languid sunshine” and the

“thinned leaves” of autumn (295); the only sound from nature is the “thrush (piping) clear” (295). The two lovers from “On the Balcony,” arms wrapped around each other as they languidly recover from sex, watch “swallows flying rapidly” (303).

Verlaine’s symbolism is an attempt to portray the sacred; to him, these golden moments represent the essence of life. O’Connor’s fiction does the same, but with a different focus. For her, the Ideal is human communion with the Divine, and all her symbols are used in service of that vision. We have seen this in “Greenleaf.” Another story from *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, “The Enduring Chill,” provides more evidence of her Symbolist tendencies.

This story features Asbury, a failed young artist who returns to the South to die of an unspecified illness, and it ends as many of hers do, with Asbury’s moment of grace; the Holy Spirit descends on him in the final sentence, “emblazoned in ice instead of fire” (CS 382). As the bull is the principal symbol in “Greenleaf,” so ice is in “The Enduring Chill”. And just as in “Greenleaf,” this metaphor is not revealed once, but it appears continually, in ways both obvious and subtle, beginning with the title. Characteristic of Symbolism, this is another private symbol, invented by the author and made coherent by its context within the story. Unlike other representations of the Holy Spirit, such as tongues of fire or a dove, ice is not a universally recognized symbol. O’Connor acknowledges this in a letter: “I see no reason to limit the Holy Ghost to fire. He’s full of surprises” (HB 293).

In the first paragraph, the Asbury’s train arrives under a “chill gray” sky (CS 357). One of the first things his mother says upon greeting him train station is “It must have been cold up there. Why don’t you take off your coat? It’s not cold down here,” to which he snaps, “You don’t have to tell me what the temperature is!” (CS 358). The reader learns that Asbury’s residence in New York City was “a freezing flat” (CS 358). A Jesuit priest’s smile is described as “touching

on some *icy* clarity” (CS 360). Tellingly, this same priest speaks to Asbury of “the possibility of the New Man, assisted...by the Third Person of the Trinity” (CS 360). The concept of iciness also appears in a letter Asbury writes to his mother, to be read upon his death. In it, he blames her for his artistic failures, hoping to “leave her with an enduring chill and perhaps in time lead her to see herself as she was” (CS 365).

The ice symbol continues to appear, becoming more overt. Above Asbury’s bed is a water stain, which he studies in his convalescence. It consists of “long icicle shapes,” as well as a bird with “an icicle crosswise in its beak and ...smaller icicles depending from its wings and tail” (CS 365). It has been there his entire life, and he sometimes imagines that the bird would deposit the ice on his head. As Asbury’s symptoms get worse, the metaphorical temperature drops: he “felt the beginning of a new chill” (CS 372). Ultimately, his illness turns out to be non-fatal, but in O’Connor’s world, what awaits him is more serious than death. Left alone in his room after the doctor delivers the happy news, he “felt the beginning of a chill...like a warm ripple across a deeper sea of cold” (CS 382). This precedes the climax, both of the story’s plot and its symbolism, as the water-stain bird appears to move. Asbury cries out vainly, but “the Holy Ghost, emblazoned in ice instead of fire, continued, implacable, to descend” (CS 382). Again, O’Connor’s Ideal – divine communion with humanity – is revealed through a recurring symbol. Asbury’s glaring flaw is his pride; a chill is what is needed to still him, to calm his vanity and make his spirit peaceful enough to receive grace.

Flannery O’Connor’s standards – at least those that concern this argument – originated with the Symbolists. It was that movement that popularized the methods O’Connor employs in “Greenleaf” and other stories, in particular the use of suggestive images and recurring symbols

with transcendent referents. However, O'Connor was not versed in the Symbolist movement, and it is a testament to these poets' vast influence that she was able to acquire their methods indirectly. As Friedman stated, many of the masters of early twentieth century fiction inherited their symbolist aesthetic from Verlaine, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and others. O'Connor, a voracious reader of the Modernists, took special note of the craft of writers she admired. One such example of this literary apprenticeship comes from her reading of Joyce. She mentions him on numerous occasions in her correspondence, at one point recommending the stories in *Dubliners* because "you can learn an awful lot from them (HB 203). She also mentions that collection's final story, "The Dead": "see how he makes the snow work in that story" (HB 84). A close reading of this story reveals a strain of Symbolism nearly identical to that found in "Greenleaf". It both looks back to the French poets and looks forward to the fiction of O'Connor.

One aspect of "The Dead" that links it to the Symbolists is the treatment of a transcendent theme. Joyce's story concerns the existential crisis of his protagonist, Gabriel, surely as difficult to convey in words as the abstract concepts of the Symbolists or the religious revelations of O'Connor. In the course of an evening, Gabriel's world unravels – he feels that his marriage is a sham and worries that his soul might be as well. In the story's famous final paragraph, Gabriel stands at the window of his hotel room and watches the snow fall on Dublin, symbolic of the great equalizing power of death. Like O'Connor's ice and bull, this is a private symbol, invented by Joyce and made meaningful by the story. The technique Joyce employs is straight from Mallarmé and Verlaine. The final image of the falling snow is the culmination of a pattern that runs throughout the story. Joyce does not insert a big symbol at the end; instead, he builds to it. In the Symbolist fashion, snow appears throughout the story, always hinting, suggesting, foreshadowing.

When Gabriel first appears, “he stood on the mat, scraping the snow from his galoshes,” and “a light fringe of snow lay like a cape on the shoulders of his overcoat and like toecaps on the toes of his galoshes” (Joyce 177). The serving girl asks him if it is snowing out, and he replies, with unknowing prescience, “I think we’re in for a night of it” (Joyce 177). After this introduction, the snow references continue, both subtly and explicitly. When his wife, Gretta, suggests a vacation to Galway, he dismisses her “coldly” (Joyce 191). This exchange takes on more significance later, when we learn that Gretta had a passionate teenaged romance in Galway. Upon learning this, Gabriel’s response is similarly chilly: “‘Perhaps that was why you wanted to go to Galway with that Ivors girl?’ he said *coldly*” (Joyce 219, emphasis mine). When Gabriel stands to give his speech, on which he has expended much energy and vanity, Joyce describes how “people, perhaps, were standing in the snow on the quay outside.” In the park, “the trees were weighted with snow” and “the Wellington Monument wore a gleaming cap of snow” (Joyce 202). Later in the evening, when a door is left open, the cold takes on an active role, seeking him out: “the piercing morning air came into the hall where they were standing” (Joyce 206).

The symbolic references continue. In one short exchange between partygoers, the word “snow” appears five times. Later, after leaving the party, Gabriel and his wife take a cab home through the snow. In one of the more overt appearances of the story’s recurring symbol, Gabriel points out a statue that they pass, which serves as his doppelganger:

“‘I see a white man this time,’ said Gabriel... Gabriel pointed to the statue, on which lay patches of snow. Then he nodded familiarly to it and waved his hand.’”

All this symbolism reaches its climax at the story’s end, as Gabriel stands at his hotel window, watching “sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight” (Joyce

223). This is surely a more peaceful climax than “Greenleaf’s,” but it is no less charged with significance, as seen in the description of Gabriel in this moment:

“His soul had approached that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead. He was conscious of, but could not apprehend, their flickering and wayward existence” (Joyce 223).

And just like “Greenleaf,” the symbol’s final appearance takes on special power and significance because it has been suggested throughout; the reader absorbs it – consciously or not – as the story progresses. Pairing this story with “Greenleaf,” “The Enduring Chill,” or any of a number of O’Connor works, one can easily see the similarity of their methods and aesthetics. Joyce inherited this subtle, layered approach from the Symbolist movement and he passed it on to his admirer, Flannery O’Connor.

Crucial to the artistic goal of the Symbolists is the idea that truth does not proceed from a poet’s words. These are writers who doubt the efficacy of language and must therefore rely on images, which are more elemental than words, thus less suspect. As we have seen in the aforementioned works of Paul Verlaine – and O’Connor’s short stories – the poems of the Symbolists abound in repeated imagery, always suggesting but never telling. For them, these repeated images are “endowed with a strange power to create more than itself” (Fowlie 110-1). In *Poem and Symbol: A Brief History of French Symbolism*, Wallace Fowlie writes that “the object in a Mallarmé poem is endowed with a force of radiation”(110).

Consider Mallarmé’s “The Windows,” in which the title reveals a recurrent image as charged with meaning as Joyce’s snow or O’Connor’s bull. For Mallarmé, inspiration is the Ideal – it is the transcendent truth that he seeks to suggest with his symbolism. In particular, he uses

conveys it with images of blankness, for to him perfection is found in nothingness. Poetry by its very nature is imperfect because the words intrude upon the sanctity of the blank page (Porter 34). In “The Windows,” a clear pane of glass is the place of inspiration. The poem opens with an old man on his deathbed, “sick of the dreary sickroom,” who leans his head against his window and “putrefies/ the warm gold panes with a long bitter kiss” (Mallarmé 11), symbolic of the artist sullyng a white page with his pen marks. Still, it is through this window that he gains inspiration, as the sight of ships on the horizon encourages him to flee. However, he never achieves resolution, and in the final stanza asks “can the glass outraged by that monster be/ shattered?” (Mallarmé 13). This is classic Symbolism, as the recurring image of the window suggests, but does not state, the dilemma that so bothered Mallarmé: the artist seeks inspiration, but the very act of creating is inimical to the Muse. All of the actions in this poem revolve around the window; the sick man’s desire to create, his decision to flee, and his unshakeable doubts at the end, they all take their meaning from the symbol, which starts in the title and reappears all the way until the final stanza.

We have already seen O’Connor employ such a central symbol in “Greenleaf” and “The Enduring Chill.” She does it elsewhere too, explaining that this tendency arises in part from the shortness of her chosen medium:

“The peculiar problem of the short-story writer is how to make the action he describes reveal as much of the mystery of existence as possible. He has only a short space...and he can’t do it by statement. He has to do it by...showing the concrete – so that his problem is really how to make the concrete work double time for him” (MM 98).

Trees work double-time in “A View of the Woods,” perhaps O’Connor’s darkest story, about the fatal conflict between Mark Fortune and his prized granddaughter, Mary. Like the bull in

“Greenleaf” and the pane of glass in “The Windows,” trees appear at the beginning and the end, encompassing the story both literally and figuratively. In this story, the trees represent Christ (Whitt 127), an association made clear in O’Connor’s first description of them: “The red corrugated lake...was bordered on the other side by a black line of woods which appeared at both ends of the view to walk across the water and continue along to the edge of the fields” (CS 335), the trees’ walking being an obvious allusion to the Gospel account of Jesus walking on the Sea of Galilee. The story’s tension arises from Mark’s desire to sell the woods – both in the name of “progress” and to spite his hated son-in-law – and Mary’s anger over this decision. Though she normally approves of his petty tyrannies, Mark cannot convince her of the efficacy of this one. “We won’t be able to see the woods from the porch,” she says plainly (CS 342). And like Verlaine’s birds and Mallarmé’s blankness, the woods are a leitmotif, haunting both characters throughout the story. To Mary, they symbolize a great mystery to which she is attracted. To Mark, they are a threat to his desire for domination. When Mark vainly tries to persuade Mary of the rightness of his decision, she will not look at him, staring instead at “the sullen line of black pine woods fringed on top with green...She looked into this scene as if it were a person that she preferred to him” (CS 347). Like Mrs. May in her battles with Mr. Greenleaf, Mark desires God-like power within his sphere of influence. Mary’s recalcitrance challenges this, as symbolized by her fixation on the trees, which represent an *actual* figure of authority. Mr. Pitts does not ultimately grasp the importance of the woods, though he comes close. One afternoon he looks at the woods several times, trying to see what Mary sees. The first two times, he sees nothing, only that “a pine trunk is a pine trunk” (CS 348). However, his third look unnerves him:

“The old man stared for some time...held there in the midst of an uncomfortable mystery that he had not apprehended before. He saw it, in his hallucination, as if someone were wounded behind the woods and the trees were bathed in blood” (CS 348). Ultimately, he closes his eyes to the vision breaking in on them, and continues in his plan to sell the woods to a local developer. The characters’ clash ends tragically when Mark tries to whip Mary for her stubbornness. She attacks him and he kills her by smashing her head against a rock. In defending the woods from her grandfather’s machinations, Mary is symbolically defending Christ, though she is not fully aware of this (Whitt 130). She retains her integrity in death. Mark dies also, but not before receiving tragic clarity. The story ends as it began. As Mark breathes his last, suffering from a stroke caused by the fight, he has a vision: “On both sides of him he saw that the gaunt trees had thickened into mysterious dark files that were marching across the water and away into the distance” (CS 356). Margaret Early Whitt captures the meaning of this succinctly: “The ending converges in his perceived self-discovery of that ‘uncomfortable mystery’ of the wood; he is not the master of this land...The woods...overpower him” (131).

The prosthetic leg in “Good Country People” is another example of a symbol with such vital importance, which O’Connor illuminates in the speech “Writing Short Stories.” Her explanation reveals an ethos remarkably similar to the Symbolists:

“This story does manage to operate at another level of experience by letting the wooden leg accumulate meaning...and we perceive that there is a wooden part of (Hulga’s) soul that corresponds to her wooden leg. Now of course this is never stated” (MM 99)

The last line in particular would please Mallarmé, as it is reminiscent of his axiom that three-quarters of an idea must remain unsaid. O’Connor describes how the leg continues to gather meaning as the story progresses and “finally, by the time the Bible salesman comes along, the leg

has accumulated so much meaning that it is, as the saying goes, loaded” (MM 99). This is a story steeped in Symbolic technique, as a simple recurring object radiates meaning throughout, signifying something different to each character. As O’Connor concludes, the symbol “increases the story in every direction, and this is essentially the way a story escapes being short” (MM 100). These stories are yet another example of the Symbolist tendencies at work within O’Connor’s fiction. In addition to representing transcendent or abstract truths, they also control the action of the story.

It is reasonable to infer that O’Connor learned this technique, at least in part, from Henry James and Joseph Conrad, both of whom she admired greatly, referring to each frequently in her letters. In both men’s work, we encounter similar centrality of symbol. James’ *The Golden Bowl* provides a representative example of this technique. “Symbolism might be spoken of as the controlling principle of structure and meaning in *The Golden Bowl*. All that happens in this novel is in some way brought under the governance of the primary symbol, the golden bowl” (Spencer 333). Like O’Connor’s prosthetic legs, trees, and bulls, the bowl serves as both the “psychological center...(as well as) the ‘scenic’ center of the novel” (334). Its imperfection symbolizes the Prince’s lack of morality, and even the characters’ knowledge of the bowl’s crack corresponds with their knowledge of the Prince’s flaws. Furthermore, “the general state of tension is reinforced with each appearance of the bowl” (337).

Or consider Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, in which a symbol – the river – quite literally controls the story by propelling the narrator through it. And like O’Connor’s symbols, this one is repetitive, growing in significance with each mention. It represents both civilization (when Marlow is on the Thames) and savagery (when he is on the Congo), while also suggesting the thin line that divides the two. Furthermore, for each character it takes on a different meaning.

To Kurtz and his ilk, it is their vehicle to both material gain and the depths of depravity; to Marlow, it is a vehicle of psychological exploration and a channel for his final escape from madness. In addition, Conrad compares it to a snake; describing his boyhood obsession with geography, Marlow notes that the sight of Congo River on a map made a deep impression: “The snake had charmed me” (Conrad 8). This statement, with all the connotations of sin and temptation that that entails, serves to further complicate the symbol. The river motif in *Heart of Darkness* is highly Symbolic, repetitive and rich in meaning, yet difficult to fully explicate. It simultaneously enlightens the reader and enhances the novel’s mystery.

In the Symbolist fashion, the bowl and the river – both private symbols invented by the authors – radiate meaning throughout their stories. This is identical to the symbolic patterns of O’Connor’s work, where concrete, quotidian objects take on new significance, charging ordinary events with transcendent meaning through the power of suggestion.

Another modern writer who was influenced by Symbolism is O’Connor’s fellow Southerner William Faulkner. In fact, Faulkner’s first publication was verse adapted from one of Mallarmé’s poems, which was then followed by translations of Verlaine (Marshall 389). Alexander Marshall’s “William Faulkner: The Symbolist Connection” details the ways that Faulkner’s French influence manifests itself in his fiction. One of the more salient examples is Faulkner’s use of synesthesia – the blending of the senses. In this way, characters in his novels “smell the bright cold” and “hear the bed and (his mother’s) face” (394). As with the use of symbols, this is an attempt to “describe the indescribable, to grasp the synchronic experience in a diachronic medium” (394).

While synesthesia never manifests itself in O'Connor's work, there is one Symbolist characteristic they do share: a preoccupation with eyes. Marshall describes Faulkner's "ocular imagery (as) reminiscent of Surrealism (a movement greatly influenced by the works of Baudelaire...and Mallarmé)" (394). His novels feature characters with eyes "like pieces of a broken plate," eyes "like two plates of chocolate pudding," and eyes "like two holes burned with a cigar" (395). In these descriptions, eyes are symbolic. They are indirect measures of character, suggesting but not telling.

Baudelaire places a similar importance on eyes. The speaker of "Sed Non Satiata" tells a temptress that "thine eyes assuage mine appetites" (Baudelaire 14). But in the next line he calls them "those black eyes, vent-holes of thy soul's shame." In "The Cat" he describes his heart as a feline in heat, then compares it to his mistress, with the most significant similarity being their eyes: "Her eyes like yours, not that nor this tress/ But eyes that penetrate my heart" (12). The "prophetic" wanderers of "Gypsies on the March" have "ardent eyes" (10). "Overcast Sky" portrays an enigmatic woman who seems to be both sexual and sterile. She has "green mysterious eyes.../Alternatively tender, drowsy, cruel,/ Reflect the pallid indolence of a jewel" (39). "The Living Torch" describes "Eyes full of lights" that "waver before" the speaker, inspiring his allegiance. "They lead me toward Beauty's vain Virginity/...My entire being obeys this torch's Divinity" (38).

O'Connor uses eye imagery frequently and for the same purpose as Faulkner and Baudelaire. Considering that it appears in nearly all of her stories, it is no overstatement to call this symbolic motif one of the defining characteristics of her writing. Rarely does she introduce an important character without a description of his or her eyes. For example, "Good Country

People” opens with a description of the limited facial expressions of Mrs. Freeman, of which the woman’s eyes are the focal point:

“Her forward expression was steady and driving like the advance of a heavy truck. Her eyes never swerved to the left or right but turned as they story turned...She seldom used the other expression because it was not often necessary for her to retract a statement, but when she did, her face come to a complete stop, there was an almost imperceptible movement of her black eyes, during which they seemed to be receding...” (CS 271).

Several pages later, her eyes are called “beady” and “steel-pointed” (CS 275). As the reader might infer from these descriptions, Mrs. Freeman is not a sympathetic character; in fact, she serves as a double for the deceitful Bible salesman who steals Hulga’s prosthetic leg (Giannone 68). As in the Symbolist fashion, O’Connor states nothing explicitly; the dark, unswerving eyes merely suggest the reality of Mrs. Freeman’s character. The eye imagery continues throughout the story, both through images of the characters’ eyes and through a focus on the act of seeing. Hulga Hopewell – a cynical, perpetually angry philosophy student – has eyes that are “icy blue” (CS 273). Her mother describes her as “bloated, rude, and squint eyed” (CS 276).

When the Bible-salesman, who has adopted the name Manley Pointer, first appears, he feigns good-natured innocence, but the close reader will see the deceit in O’Connor’s description of his eyes. When he gets Mrs. Hopewell’s name wrong, she corrects him: “‘Oh!’ he said, pretending to look puzzled but with his eyes sparkling” (CS 277). In fact, he has targeted the house because Hulga has a prosthetic leg, which he wants for his own. He has dinner with the family and regales them with long-winded tales of his humble upbringings and his missionary aspirations. However, he undergoes a change once he and Hulga are alone. She meets him for a rendezvous in the woods and “his look was different from what it had been at the dinner table.

He was gazing at her with an open curiosity” (CS 283). As they converse “his eyes were very small and brown, glittering feverishly” (CS 284). Alone with Manley in a barn-loft, Hulga is still unaware of his true motives and attempts to shock his tender sensibilities with her nihilism, which is centered around what she *sees*: “I’m one of those people who see *through* to nothing” (CS 287). He then persuades her to remove the leg and let him hold it. At this point, when he has what he wants, his “eyes (become) like two steel spikes” (CS 289). As he leaves the barn with his prize, O’Connor includes one final ocular reference, when Manley informs Hulga that he she is not his first victim: “One time I got a woman’s glass eye this way” (CS 291). Back at the house, Mrs. Freeman sees her double running away: “her gaze drove forward and just touched him before he disappeared under the hill” (CS 291). Characteristic of the woman, Mrs. Freeman fails to grasp her similarity to Manley; her vision, filtered through “black, beady, steel-pointed” eyes, shows her nothing. She delivers the story’s last line, which is a marvel of self-delusion: “‘Some can’t be that simple,’ she said. ‘I know I never could’” (CS 291).

For most of O’Connor’s stories, a similar eye-focused reading will yield fruitful results. The ringleader of the demonic, forest fire-setting gang of boys in “A Circle in the Fire” is cockeyed: “one of his eyes had a slight cast to it so that his gaze seemed to be coming from two directions at once as if it had them surrounded” (CS 179); all the boys “had white penetrating stares” (CS 179). Mr. Paradise, the loud, angry cynic from “The River” has “dull eyes” (CS 174). The mother from “Everything that Rises Must Converge” has eyes that “are sky-blue...as innocent and untouched by experience as they must have been when she was ten” (CS 406). When the nasty grandfather from “A View of the Woods” fights his made-in-his-own-image granddaughter, O’Connor describes it as “Pale identical eye looked into pale identical eye” (CS 355). In “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” the Misfit symbolizes his openness to God’s grace by

removing his glasses. After the grandmother reaches out to him in love, for which he shoots her, he takes off his spectacles: “Without his glasses, The Misfit’s eyes were red-rimmed and pale and defenseless looking” (CS 133). This is O’Connor’s characteristic “moment of grace,” and her description of The Misfit’s eyes shows just how much it unsettles him.

This motif is also found in Joyce, one more example of his Symbolist tendencies. Gabriel’s dull Aunt Julia has “mirthless eyes” (Joyce 180). Freddy Malins, an alcoholic, has “heavy-lidded eyes” and is seen “rubbing the knuckles of his left fist backwards and forwards into his left eye” (Joyce 184). Miss Ivors, an impressive woman who challenges and upsets Gabriel, has “prominent brown eyes” (Joyce 187). Most significant are the eyes of Michael Furey – Gabriel’s foil and Gretta’s passionate young lover. They are the part of him she remembers most: “Such eyes as he had: big, dark eyes” (Joyce 219). Compare these eyes with Gabriel’s, which are described as “restless” and “curious” (Joyce 178, 222). This technique extends beyond “The Dead.” The deviant who corners the young narrator of “An Encounter” has “a pair of bottle-green eyes...under a twitching forehead” (Joyce 27). The eponymous protagonist of “Eveline,” when she fails to board the boat that will take her away from Ireland, reveals her anguish through her eyes, which receive their only mention in the story’s final sentence: “Her eyes gave (her lover) no sign of love or farewell or recognition” (Joyce 41).

Marshall writes of Faulkner’s eye imagery, “These elaborate similes give the reader an effect, an impression, rather than a realistic description...it must be remembered that Symbolism seeks not to *describe* but to *suggest* and *evoke* sensations in the reader’s mind comparable to direct experience” (395). The same could be said for O’Connor, who would prefer her reader to intuit the state of characters’ souls than have to be told outright. It is unclear if O’Connor borrowed this technique directly from Faulkner, however. In her letters she indicates admiration

for and familiarity with him: “I read the best Southern writers like Faulkner” (HB 98). She also tells a friend that “you better had get and read” *Light in August*. However, in the same letter she indicates that she maintains a healthy distance from the great man: “I keep clear of Faulkner so my own little boat won’t get swamped” (HB 273). But whether or not she lifted this technique directly from Faulkner – or Joyce – matters little. The fact is that the Symbolist movement made such a technique possible through its aforementioned “begetting of attitudes, predilections, sensibilities” (Levenson 26). The ethos of suggestion and impressionism exists in twentieth-century American literature because the work of Mallarmé, Verlaine, Baudelaire, and others planted the seed.

O’Connor’s eye motif also reveals another Symbolist influence, the appearance of the same image across multiple works, which we have already seen in the ever-present bird imagery of Verlaine. A close reading of Mallarmé reveals similar repetition. Indeed, Mallarmé is perhaps the man most responsible for the promotion of this ethic. In describing the difficulties of classifying the movement, Porter writes that “literary historians have not agreed on who the Symbolists were,” noting that of all the conflicting opinions on who populated the movement, “only Mallarmé appears on everyone’s list” as a result of his “limited and tightly organized vocabulary of metaphors” (6-8).

Obviously, such a concentrated focus on metaphor signals an author’s priority. For O’Connor, holiness is paramount, and her repetitive imagery concerns her characters’ spiritual state. For Verlaine, moments of temporary bliss are supreme. And for Mallarmé, art is paramount, and his recurrent images center on inspiration, a concept that troubles him greatly. The paradox of Mallarmé’s writing is that he seeks to describe an Absolute that he does not

believe exists (Porter 36). His response to this dilemma is to “depict a Muse figure (inspiration, our intermediary with Beauty, personified) but show her only vanishing... Her theater is the expanse of water or ice, or the white page, figuring the myth of the unattainable origin” (Porter 36). This theme, so important to Mallarmé, shows up again and again in his poetry, not in explicit language but in images of blankness as suggestive and pervasive as O’Connor’s ever-present eyes, suns, and mangled limbs. “[‘Weary of bitter rest...’]” features an idealized artist, “the limpid-souled refined Chinese” who delights in painting “cups made of moon-ravished snow” (Mallarmé 19). The speaker then imagines himself painting “a lake in skies of naked porcelain,/ a lucid crescent lost behind white cloud proceeds/ to steep its placed horn into the waters’ ice” (Mallarmé 19). “Toast” describes “wintry seas of blast and gale,” as well as the “sail’s white preoccupation” (Mallarmé 3). In “Ill Fortune,” a ragged group of people (seemingly artists) are “hoping for the sea that they always seek,/ gnawing the sour Ideal’s golden lemon” (Mallarmé 3). “The Flowers” describes a “sobbing white of lilies.../tumbling lightly across a sea of sighs...” (Mallarmé 15). “Renewal” laments that “sickly spring has sadly driven away/ winter, clear winter, season of calm art.” In winter’s place are the bright colors and loud noises of spring, which disturb the speaker. Without the welcome emptiness necessary for inspiration, “impotence stretches inside my heart” (Mallarmé 15). “Sea Breeze” paints a picture of literary ennui, a speaker who has “read every book,” but still has a “heart steeped in the sea” (Mallarmé 25). A full account of this motif in Mallarmé’s work would take many more pages, but this is a representative sample of the manner in which images of blankness pervade his poetry. This tendency of Mallarmé’s illustrates one of Symbolism’s major contributions to modern literature: the notion that an artist’s work can be thematically connected by recurring images, *leitmotifs* that occur not only within a work but across works.

Eyes are the most prominent example of this tendency in O'Connor's work, but another is missing or mangled limbs. Three separate works by O'Connor feature a character with such an ailment, and in each case this is symbolic for a deeper affliction of the soul. Hulga's missing leg in "Good Country People" suggests her spiritual state, crippled by the nihilism that "saw through to nothing." Manley's theft of the leg was an act of grace, an opportunity to shed her disability and become spiritually whole. "The Lame Shall Enter First" features Sheppard, a misguided social worker who takes into his home a delinquent boy with a club foot. Predictably, his efforts at saving the boy – named Johnson – fail miserably. Johnson proudly boasts that "Satan...has me in his power" (CS 450) and takes special pride in his disability, "as touchy about the foot as if it were a sacred object" (CS 459). As the story unfolds, the boy's malign influence on Sheppard's son increases. Not coincidentally, Johnson's foot grows as well; a shoe that fit him earlier no longer does. This does not bode well for Sheppard's attempts at rehabilitating him, and indeed, the arrangement ends badly, with Johnson being arrested for burglary and Sheppard's son hanging himself. The member in question in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" is an arm, owned by an itinerant con-man named Mr. Shiftlet. He targets a woman and her mentally disabled daughter, misjudged by the mother because of his unimposing appearance. The perceptive reader of O'Connor, however, knows from the first appearance of his crippled arm that he is not to be trusted. Eventually, Mr. Shiftlet steals the family's car and abandons the daughter, whom he has just married, at a roadside diner. The story ends with "his stump sticking out the window" (CS 156) as he drives into Mobile, a final symbolic reminder of his wickedness.

The sun is another suggestive motif that O'Connor employs throughout her work. In particular, she uses it as a kind of foil for her prideful characters, a symbol of *actual* power and immutability shining down on the self-aggrandizing types who populate her fiction. In the

reader's introduction to the mother in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," she watches the approaching Mr. Shiftlet by "shading her eyes from the piercing sunset with her hand" (CS 145). She then stands "with her arms folded across her chest as if she were the owner of the sun" (CS 146). When he comments, "I'd give a fortune to live where I could see me a sun do that every evening," she replies curtly, "Does it every evening" (CS 146). Her unchecked pride – the cardinal sin in O'Connor's fiction – is demonstrated in her failure to be impressed by an awesome, life-sustaining force of nature.

The sun serves the same purpose in "Greenleaf," since Mrs. May is just as self-assured as the unnamed mother from "The Life You Save May Be Your Own." In fact, she only learns humility from the bull because she fails to be humbled by the other powerful symbol hovering throughout the story. Indeed, the sun takes as active a role as the bull eventually will. When Mrs. May steps outside after giving a disdainful appraisal of the Greenleaf's milking room, she misses a key opportunity to repent: "The light outside was no 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" (CS 325). A bullet able, no doubt, to put to death her vanity. And this is not her only chance. The night before her death, she dreams that she is walking across her property and witnesses "the sun trying to burn through the tree line" (CS 329). It does not concern her, though, "safe in the knowledge that it couldn't, that it had to sink the way it always did outside of her property." However, as she watches, the sun narrows until it resembles a "bullet," then "suddenly it burst through the tree line and raced down the hill toward her" (CS 329). She wakes with a start, only to hear the story's other recurring symbol outside her window, chewing on her hedge. Moments before she is gored, she drives Mr. Greenleaf to the pasture to force him to shoot the bull. She reclines on the car as she waits and "through her closed eyes, she could feel the sun, red-hot overhead" (CS

332). The last two adjectives in this description highlight the sun's superiority to Mrs. May, which she does not recognize – is incapable of recognizing – until the bull puts an end to her pride. As with O'Connor's other motifs, the sun does not have an exact meaning; it is not a variable in a literary equation that can "solve" her works. It is simply another symbolic instrument of suggestion that accumulates, both across single stories and across her entire body of work.

In addition to revealing similar aesthetic patterns with O'Connor, Mallarmé's focus on blankness also reveals a similar attitude towards inspiration. Both writers idealize a moment of divine communication. For Mallarmé, this comes from the Muse; for O'Connor, it comes from God. Furthermore, both believe that inspiration only comes from emptiness. For Mallarmé, words are a necessary evil, intruding upon the perfect blank space of the page, when "what is beautiful in his vision is the absolute purity of non-being" (Porter 34). We see this in "Renewal," previously mentioned, in which poetic fecundity disappears when the loud brightness of spring replaces the void of winter, or in "The Window," in which an old man "putrefies" a clean window by kissing it, representing the intrusion of humanity on perfect nothingness.

O'Connor's writing is similar. The distracting chaos of spring in "Renewal" is like the cacophony in her characters' minds. The typical denizen of an O'Connor story is too self-involved to hear the quiet whisper of God; he only receives revelation when his mind is blank. Consider Mrs. McIntyre from "The Displaced Person," a once strong-willed farm woman whose guilt over Mr. Guizac's death reduces her to bed-ridden, mute state. Only now that her mind is still does she hear the divine voice. The priest regularly visits her, where he "would come in and sit by the side of her bed and explain the doctrines of the church" (CS 235). Hulga, never shy about her opinions throughout "Good Country People," has nothing to say as the Bible salesman

delivers his final insults before disappearing down the barn's ladder. Her face only "churns." His betrayal, and especially his condemnation, has rendered mute her cynical proselytizing. The reader never sees whether or not she experiences a divine revelation, but we realize that if there were ever a moment for her to hear God, this is it. Or consider the opinionated Mrs. Turpin of "Revelation," finally silent as she is overpowered by the vision she sees in the sky.

Hints of Symbolism abound in Flannery O'Connor's body of work. We see them in her use of recurring motifs such as ocular and sun imagery, in her reliance on symbol to convey abstract Ideals, in her invention of private metaphors that become increasingly meaningful as they gather context. O'Connor is the beneficiary of the Symbolists' influence on modern fiction. These poets created a way of writing that transcended mere language. Their work relies on the power of vision, the visceral nature of humans' response to images. The success of the Symbolist Movement is evident not only in the quality of its art, but in the sizeable footprint it left on modern literature, including that produced by Flannery O'Connor.

Chapter 3: Flannery O'Connor's Unique Vision

Though Flannery O'Connor owes much to the Symbolists, she does not abide by every one of the tenets that they conferred to Modernism. For every Symbolist trope she employs, one can find another O'Connor passage that would make the French poets cringe. In his "Preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus,'*" Joseph Conrad writes that the true artist cannot be bound by adherence to a particular school. "It is evident that he who, rightly or wrongly, holds by the convictions expressed above cannot be faithful to any one of the temporary formulas of his craft" (281). Conrad seeks a truth more immutable than the shifting tide of literary fashion, and feels that a novelist who accepts a label binds himself to that movement's limitations. Flannery O'Connor admired Conrad greatly, and her agreement with this statement is borne out in the variety of style one finds within her work. She is not just a Symbolist writer, or a modern writer, or an American writer. She is all these things, and her ultimate allegiance was not to an aesthetic school but to her faith.

Her frequent use of Symbolism indicates her acceptance of Mallarmé's famous axiom, which says, to paraphrase, that naming something suppresses most of its enjoyment, that the true joy lies in suggestion. Taken as a whole, her work is a testament to the power of suggestion. She hints with her characters' eyes, with their ailments, with her scenery descriptions. However, she is also an artist of the type Conrad describes, and she does not shy away from breaking with artistic convention if she feels it is warranted. Like Conrad, she is compelled "to hold up unquestioningly, without choice and without fear, the rescued fragment before all eyes in the light of a sincere mood...to show its vibration, its colour, its form..." (Conrad 281).

For O'Connor, symbolism is certainly one method for revealing "vibration, colour, and form." However, she also tackles her subject more directly, unafraid to break the Symbolist/

Modernist “show, don’t tell” dictum. “The Artificial Nigger” provides a well-known example of this. At the story’s end, Mr. Head has a religious experience, similar to that symbolized in “The Enduring Chill” and “Greenleaf.” However, O’Connor is much more descriptive in this instance. After betraying his grandson Nelson, and then receiving Nelson’s forgiveness, Mr. Head has a revelation:

“Mr. Head stood very still and felt the action of mercy touch him again but this time he knew that there were no words in the world that could name it...He stood appalled, judging himself with the thoroughness of God, while the action of mercy covered his pride like a flame and consumed it...He saw that no sin was too monstrous for him to claim as his own, and since God loved in proportion as He forgave, he felt ready at that instant to enter Paradise” (CS 270).

One cannot imagine Mallarmé reading such a description with approval. O’Connor scholar John Sykes does not. In “What the Symbol Means,” he calls the ending a flaw, depicting it as an example of a great writer stumbling as she learns how to properly use the symbol:

“O’Connor does not simply raise the level of her diction; she introduces authorial commentary meant to instruct the reader. And in terms of the New Critical demand for organic unity and in light of the practice of masters such as Flaubert or Chekhov or Joyce, this commentary is an artistic blemish” (Sykes 134).

Tellingly, O’Connor counts this instance of kicking against the Modernist gods as her favorite story from *A Good Man is Hard to Find* (HB 101). While she agrees with and employs the admonition against “telling,” she does not follow it rigorously. When the moment calls for it, O’Connor will eschew suggestion and lay things out quite plainly. What makes this example especially intriguing is that this blunt description of Mr. Head’s spiritual state is precipitated by

an encounter with a transcendent symbol – a broken-down yard figurine from which the story takes its title. Of this symbol, she writes, “What I had in mind to suggest with the artificial nigger was the redemptive quality of the Negro’s suffering for us all” (NB 78). Note the use the word “suggest”; at no point in the story does she dictate the statue’s meaning. In “The Artificial Nigger,” O’Connor is at both ends of the spectrum: she suggests and hints, like a good Modernist (or Symbolist), but she also states things plainly. She is not “faithful to any one of the temporary formulas of her craft,” because her main goal – portraying the truth as she sees it – requires a flexible approach.

Another such example is found in “The Lame Shall Enter First,” when Sheppard realizes that he has neglected his son and has a similar moment of brutal clarity:

“His heart constricted with a repulsion for himself so clear and intense that he gasped for breath. He had stuffed his own emptiness with good works like a glutton. He had ignored his own child to feed his vision of himself...His image of himself shriveled until everything was black before him” (481).

There is nothing subtle about this description. O’Connor does not depict Sheppard’s actions and let the reader intuit his state of mind, nor does she reveal it indirectly through dialogue. Instead, she says exactly what is going on in his soul. And, like the previous example, this telling is juxtaposed with a symbol. The story ends with his son’s suicide, and the boy’s body, hanging from an attic beam, suggests the death of Christ: “The gentle ghost of Norton will inhabit Sheppard’s conscience with the same persistence that (Jesus) stalks Hazel Motes (of *Wise Blood*)...Norton has paid for his father’s sins” (Giannone 209). Like the lawn ornament from “The Artificial Nigger,” this symbol is left unexplained, radiating unspoken meaning to the reader. However, the passage that precedes it is as blunt as an O’Connor farm woman. This

work also seems to lack “organic unity,” but that is not what O’Connor is after; she is after her Ideal – depicting God’s communication with humanity – and she cares little which artistic school she offends in the process.

One of the main similarities between O’Connor and the Symbolists is their common obsession with an Ideal. They are writers fixated on the transcendent and, unable to express it in words, rely on the symbol. However, a closer examination of their works reveals an important difference between her artistic project and theirs. The poets’ Ideals are regressive, while O’Connor’s is progressive.

Baudelaire provides a particularly good example of these opposing tendencies. Both he and O’Connor share a preoccupation with human sinfulness. No reader comes away from either of these writers’ works feeling chipper about the human condition. However, they approach the matter in opposite ways. O’Connor’s work – and her Ideal – involves transcending sin by the grace of God; it is a movement forward. Baudelaire’s is a retreat, a desire to return to infancy, before sin was possible. As he writes: “By virtue of his very nature, every lyric poet inevitably accomplishes a return toward the lost Garden of Eden” (Porter 135). And just as O’Connor relies on the symbol to effect her Ideal, so does Baudelaire.

For him, a main attraction of infancy is the guilt-free enjoyment of sensual pleasure. His work is famously sexual, though not always celebratory of the subject. Indeed, a sense of carnal guilt pervades his poetry, whether it is “Don Juan in Hell” and its vision of a notorious lover receiving eternal punishment, or “Spiritual Dawn,” which depicts a tormented confession of debauchery committed in “an Evil House,” for which devils “damn me” (Baudelaire 43). Contrast this with Baudelaire’s vision of childhood:

“What is it that the child loves so passionately in his mother, in his nanny, in his older sister? Is it merely the being who feeds him, combs him, washes him, and tucks him in?

It’s also caresses and sensual delight (Porter 135).

This is his Ideal, the prelapsarian bliss of infancy, though he is loath to describe it outright. So, in the Symbolist fashion, he “stages regression by organizing a tightly coherent system of metaphors” (Porter 135). As with Mallarmé and Verlaine (and O’Connor), the metaphors are not limited to one poem, but are characteristic of all his writing.

Baudelaire symbolizes his regressive fantasy through repeated breast imagery (Porter 136). “The Giantess” presents a woman’s body as colossal, suggestive of a baby crawling over its mother (Porter 136): “To wander over her huge forms/...to crawl over the slopes of her knees enormous/...to sleep listlessly in the shadow of her superb breasts” (Baudelaire 27). Breasts appear again in “Lethe”: “I shall seek.../Hemlock and a drug liquescent/ From thy breasts...” (Baudelaire 34). These lines are preceded by a request for the woman to “swathe my head in thy skirts” (Baudelaire 33). This exact action is not recommended for infants as it might inhibit breathing, but there is something maternal in the idea of the woman wrapping him, especially when it is followed by her breasts giving him sustenance. A deadly bosom appears in the poem “Beauty,” which describes a woman “beautiful as a dream of stone” with a breast “where men are slain” (Baudelaire 24). This oddly singular breast inspires Baudelaire to describe his Ideal quite concisely; the breast inspires “Passions that.../Are mute and carnal as matter and as eternal” (Baudelaire 24). “Mute” in particular is suggestive of infancy; he is describing a pre-verbal state of sublime enjoyment. In another, untitled poem, he is even more explicit: “Like a new-born, I suckle and bite her” (Porter 137). This infatuation did not endear him to a reviewer

of his book *Flowers of Evil*, who noted that “you never saw so many breasts bitten and even chewed in so few pages” (Porter 138).

Baudelaire’s poetry is preoccupied by his inability to regain the innocence of childhood. It is haunted by loss and brokenness; he would not romanticize infancy if he found fulfillment in adult relationships. Furthermore, Baudelaire cannot even find solace in his Ideal, as his poetry often presents corrupted images of breasts (Porter 153). Consider the “philtres infames” in “Destruction”: harmful breasts loaded with venom (Porter 154). Or the woman in “Metamorphoses of the Vampire,” who displays her breasts to the speaker, then sucks the marrow from his bones (Porter 154). And just as his work is centered on loss, so is that of the other Symbolists. Were Verlaine’s life one uninterrupted golden moment, his poetry would not obsess over “rosy hearths.” Instead, he seems to love these moments *because* they are fleeting. His poetry fetishizes melancholy, which is another way of saying he fetishizes loss. Mallarmé is similar. A chapter in Porter’s *The Crisis of French Symbolism*, aptly titled “Mallarmé’s Disappearing Muse,” describes how the poet’s revisions reveal a growing cynicism about inspiration, “revisions that all enhance the impression of ‘incommunicabilite’” (41). The Muse is portrayed as vanishing, just out of reach, like the sirens in “Toast” that dive off in the distance (Mallarmé’s Muse is often depicted as “female and supernatural”) (37).

O’Connor’s writing is also concerned with loss, but in her fictional universe, loss is not something to be mourned; loss is gain. It is only through loss that her characters move forward. Indeed, this is the climactic moment of nearly all of her short stories. Mrs. May achieves transcendence in her last moments only because the bull has put to death her pride. Asbury’s loss of intellectual snobbery opens the door for a divine encounter. Sheppard’s dual loss at the end of “The Lame Shall Enter First” – the death of both his foolish convictions and his son – gives him

the humility to move forward on the path to God. In “The Partridge Festival,” Calhoun’s self-destructive cynicism is shattered when he is confronted with the insanity of his idol – the murderer Singleton. Mr. Head, from “The Artificial Nigger,” finds peace only when he loses the pride he has carried throughout his life. The death of the hired man in “The Displaced Person” is a tragedy for Mrs. McIntyre, reducing her to a catatonic state. However, it is only in this passive condition that she is finally able to receive the ministrations of the Catholic priest; before she would only argue with him. And the Grandmother in “A Good Man is Hard to Find” must lose everything before regaining her childlike innocence. As dark as O’Connor’s work can be, it has hopeful underpinnings.

O’Connor’s treatment of these dark epiphanies is another instance in which she both resembles and differs from those who influenced her. In describing modern short fiction as “a surprising legacy of Symbolism,” Michael Levenson notes that such works “address no higher realms of the spirit...Its symbolic work is rather to suggest density in *this world*, a complex zone of conflicts and implications concealed beneath the rituals of everyday life” (231). This is decidedly not true for O’Connor, whose symbolism almost always points up, towards Divinity. Her moments of climatic self-realization are certainly reminiscent of Joyce’s short fiction, but the epiphanies are strikingly different in their import. Consider Joyce’s “Araby,” for example. After failing in his attempt to purchase a gift for his romantic interest, the young narrator receives painful self-knowledge: “Gazing up into the darkness, I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger” (Joyce 35). The boy recognizes his own hollowness, the futility of all his efforts. Were he a Flannery O’Connor character, this moment would be his salvation; he would be able to find release from the vanity that consumes him and revel in the fellowship with God that results from his newfound humility.

In Joyce's fictive world, however, such a realization is much more crushing. The worldly things that the boy desires are his only if he can buck up and obtain them on his own merit. Self-knowledge is portrayed negatively in much modern fiction. Indeed, in Joseph Conrad's fictive world it is "horror."

"Araby" is not the only example of this. Mr. Duffy, the conceited, lonely protagonist of "A Painful Case," is spurred to a crushing realization similar to Gabriel's upon reading of the death of a former mistress. He had ended the relationship, thinking her beneath him, but the truth hits him suddenly, and he wanders the city aimlessly. "He felt his moral nature falling to pieces" and "gnawed the rectitude of his life" (Joyce 117). The story's last line has a brutal finality to it: "He felt that he was alone" (Joyce 117). Jimmy, at the end of "After the Race," drunkenly loses his money and realizes his tenuous position in the group of rich young men he wants to infiltrate. Gabriel's epiphany to close "The Dead" has a supernatural element to it, but – unlike the supernatural in O'Connor's fiction – the "hosts of the dead" that Gabriel considers are not benevolent; instead, they seem indifferent to him. These stories end on a bitter note, with pretensions smashed and dreams crushed.

To be sure, all is not lost for these characters. Their self-awareness could conceivably lead them to reform. Similarly, in *Heart of Darkness*, the horror of Kurtz is Marlow's salvation; he sees the frightful nature of the human condition and lives to tell the tale, presumably wiser because of his new knowledge. However, this is not a moment of release for any of these characters. It is profoundly painful, because they have to renew their efforts in the midst of despair. Gabriel has to attend to his marriage the next morning in spite of the painful revelations of the previous night, Mr. Duffy has to create a meaningful life after decades spent as a lonely misanthrope.

Like Joyce, O'Connor peoples her fiction with characters who have a remarkable lack of self-awareness, then seems to delight in putting a swift end to their delusions. However, in O'Connor's view destruction is redemption. The brutal self-knowledge her characters get is their salvation; it is the gateway to God. Consider the previously quoted ending to "The Lame Shall Enter First," in which Sheppard has a similar moment of "shameful self-consciousness." Arguably, this is more devastating than Gabriel's revelation because it is followed by Sheppard's discovery of his son's suicide. He has no opportunity to make things right. However, this moment is also his salvation. As long as Sheppard has a high opinion of himself – "He thinks he's Jesus Christ!" in the words of Johnson, his delinquent reclamation project – he is lost (CS 459). His shame opens the door to freedom. The same is true for Mr. Head, who "saw that no sin was too monstrous for him to claim as his own," and *then* is "ready at that instant to enter Paradise" (CS 270).

Widely read as she was, O'Connor had much exposure to different schools of writing. However, she adheres to none of them. According to her, the main goal of the novelist is to "render his vision so that it can be transferred, nearly as whole as possible, to his reader," adding wryly that "you can safely ignore the reader's taste" (MM 162). Frequently the transference of O'Connor's vision requires Symbolist technique, which she liberally employs. But just as often, she bucks convention, unconcerned by critical scorn, as true to her vision as the French poets are to theirs.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

In a speech, O'Connor describes her aunt's reaction to "The Life You Save May Be Your Own." The lady enjoys the made-for-TV version better than the short story because of its sense of completion; on television Mr. Shiftlet returns to the diner and reunites with his bride.

O'Connor notes that her own thoughts on the director's changes "are not suitable for public utterance" (MM 95). She prefers the original ending because "there is nothing more relating to the mystery of that man's personality that could be shown through that particular dramatization" (MM 94).

O'Connor's respect for mystery ties her to the Symbolists as much as any artistic technique. These poets recognize the difficulty of being a flesh-and-blood being in search of abstract meaning. Their techniques for expressing this dilemma offer few answers, but instead serve to deepen the mystery. They depict one of the most illogical characteristics of humanity – our pursuit of the unobtainable. Their work is haunted by it, by Baudelaire's search for the lost bliss of infancy, Verlaine's for evanescent moments of delight, Mallarmé's obsession with an ever-vanishing Muse. They spend themselves on a futile enterprise, straining ahead with the full knowledge that their reach exceeds their grasp.

Flannery O'Connor's work is just as obsessive. And while the geographic and demographic scope of her work is small, its reach is enormous. She does not consider herself a writer only for Southerners, Catholics, Americans, or any other group. "So far as I am concerned as a novelist," she writes, "a bomb on Hiroshima affects my judgment of life in rural Georgia" (MM 134). The world's problems are her characters' problems, and vice versa. It is this universality that gives the symbol such importance to her work. Images cut across cultural and linguistic barriers, they affect readers viscerally, they are more apt to get lodged in one's brain

than words.

Most of O'Connor's influences serve to explain the contents of her fiction. The rural settings, the orthodox underpinnings, the ever-present awareness of mortality – a perusal of any of her biographies will quickly explain the presence of these elements. The Symbolists' influence is more subtle. They are responsible not for the contents of her work, but for her techniques. These poets bequeathed an aesthetic to modern fiction, a way of conveying abstract ideals to a world increasingly preoccupied with the concrete. O'Connor has a different Ideal than these poets, but their concerns are the same. They are artists who want to transcend art, to use their words to point to a higher plane of human experience. The Symbolists originated this method and, fortunately for readers of modern fiction, Flannery O'Connor adopted it, using their methods to fill the lives of her unassuming characters with mystery and divinity.

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