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With Ground Teeth: a Study of Flannery O'CONNOR'S Women.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

Eighteen of Flannery O'Connor's short stories feature women as protagonists or antagonists. Of the remaining thirteen stories in the canon, four are assimilated into her novel Wise Blood. This study, then, encompasses the entire O'Connor canon with the exceptions of the novel The Violent Bear It Away and eight short stories, since one of the remaining nine stories is a part of The Violent Bear It Away. The majority, then, of O'Connor's short stories feature women in leading roles. Even those in supporting roles seem prominent. With the women in Wise Blood, they dramatize O'Connor's special vision of comedy and horror as two sides of the same coin. Their fallacious assumptions concerning reality provide simultaneously ludicrous and terrible developments. Although O'Connor is not unique in mixing humor and horror, she is so adept at it that some critics, mired in traditional separations of tragedy and comedy, object to her stories. William F. Lynch's discussion of irony and comedy in relation to faith--O'Connor's special concern--is thus particularly valuable in overcoming this critical resistance and in analyzing the place of women in her fictional world.

Although certain similarities among O'Connor's

women have been noted, no systematic study has yet been made of all the women in her works. Drawing on Lynch, this study attempts to show that for the most part the women possess imaginations inclined to reduce all of reality to the simplest common denominator. Everything from God to onions is viewed by the same facile optic. This rigidity is their common characteristic; their imperceptive, unyielding personalities generate both the comedy and the terror of her stories.

The women are divided into four basic types: the managerial Martha, her chthonic double, the mother or surrogate-mother, and the seductress. The Martha type is obsessed with the work ethic, cleanliness, and the social order of the South. Her double has a sense of mystery lacking in the optimistic Martha. The double, however, is equally rigid, viewing all in terms of disease and death. The mother figures, though sharing the Marthas' faith in the work ethic and in their own energies, have more varied concerns than the Marthas or their doubles. Some have reversed roles with their parents; one has just discovered her pregnancy. While the mothers are generally preoccupied with their dependents, the seductresses pursue the bodies or souls of men. Three pride themselves on their intellects while the rest have no such pretensions.

Women's traditional roles are shattered in O'Connor's

unsentimentalized fictional world. The women are usually independent and nearly all lose whatever struggle they engage in. The men in her fiction are invariably disruptive and, in the short stories at least, are as ludicrous as the women. In several instances, the male eludes the fixed snare of the female who would lure him into the complacency of her clichéd world. The ironies of the comically terrible O'Connor women--as Marthas, prophets of disaster, mothers, and seductresses--are nonetheless recognizable as those of their real life counterparts.

INTRODUCTION

"If I were to live long enough and develop as an artist to the proper extent, I would like to write a comic novel about a woman--and what is more comic and terrible than the angular intellectual proud woman approaching God inch by inch with ground teeth?"[1] Although she did not live to fulfill that desire, Flannery O'Connor created twenty-five women who evoke a vivid awareness of the comedy and the horror that is life. Their stories dramatize O'Connor's belief that comedy and terror are two sides of the same coin.[2] Her seamless fusions of those two elements in the stories of farm managers, mothers, wives, and liberated intellectuals place those familiar feminine roles in such strange lights that some critics object to breaks in tone.[3] Such charges are quite unfounded, as a careful analysis of the multiple ironies of each story reveals a consistency. The numerous ironies also make possible both the humor and the serious import of the fiction.

Adding to the complexity of the fusion of comedy and terror is Flannery O'Connor's staunch Roman Catholicism, the firm center of her unflinching view. Among others, three excellent sources furnish insight into O'Connor's faith and works: Kathleen Feeley's Flannery O'Connor: Voice of the Peacock; David Eggenschwiler's The Christian Humanism of Flannery

O'Connor; and John R. May's The Pruning Word: The Parables of Flannery O'Connor.

But to explore particularly the integral relationship between comedy and faith through the O'Connor women, the theories of William F. Lynch, S. J., are perhaps the most helpful. In his Christ and Apollo, he defines comedy as a means of salvation, and in his Images of Faith: An Exploration of the Ironic Imagination, he elucidates the mutual needs of faith and irony, concluding with an explanation of the "healing images of irony." Although he uses no examples from Flannery O'Connor, he could have, for her works fit his theories well. She referred to Lynch as "one of the most learned priests in the country," and sent a copy of his Christ and Apollo to a friend with a note saying that the book "has some good answers to the question of what-are-you-saying."[4] Those familiar with O'Connor's acerbic critical faculties can appreciate her compliment to Lynch, for she sometimes in her letters comments scathingly on clerical literary obtuseness.[5]

To begin with, critics like Robert Drake erroneously maintain that readers not sharing O'Connor's theological assumptions cannot "enter into both the substance and the shadow of her work."[6] Flannery O'Connor's writings are nowhere so esoteric as that. Rather, as Lynch says, "whatever the self is seeking in its interior life--whether simply insight of human

kind or some transcendent ideal, . . . it cannot help taking certain attitudes /that are/ theological in the broadest sense. Therefore, all meaningful literature is theological--in the broadest sense."[7] He convincingly shows, in The Image Industries, Christ and Apollo, and Images of Faith, that the concerns of theology and art are not mutually exclusive. Particularly in Images of Faith, he opposes a dichotomy between theology as guardian of standards or morals and art as guardian of sensibility.[8]

His ideas are compatible with O'Connor's views, traceable to Saint Thomas: "Art is wholly concerned with the good of that which is made; it has no utilitarian end." The successful use of art for any purpose depends upon its being "art first."[9] While her central vision is always anchored in a firm belief in grace and salvation, the reader does not necessarily have to share her belief or lack of it in order to understand the stories or the types of women she writes about, Drake notwithstanding. One can understand her faith without sharing it.

Her faith no more deters a reader from entering fully into her microcosms of Southern manners than her comedy deters an understanding of the terrors the women create. Lynch also defends the worth of comedy: "The way of comedy taxes the imagination and the whole soul more than does tragedy, and requires even more courage

as a way into God. It is a more terrible way, requiring a greater ascesis, requiring more faith in the finite."[10] According to him, one cannot transcend reality by ignoring it or by denying its relevance to a higher plane; such efforts result in superficiality. O'Connor's women are both comic and dreadful in their single-minded preoccupations with the literal and practical aspects of existence. Some transcend their realities while others do not. The reader, however, becomes acutely aware of their vain lives.

A purpose of this study, therefore, is to show how O'Connor's comedy of women exemplifies Lynch's belief that such use of the limited concrete is "the path to insight and salvation."[11] O'Connor herself scorns neophyte writers who are "too lazy or highfalutin to descend to the concrete where fiction operates." She believes that "the supernatural taking place" can only be shown through "the literal level of natural events."[12] Much of the comedy derives from the contrast of the limited cares of the mothers with the abstract intellectualism of their offspring. Critics like Josephine Hendin, therefore, are wrong in saying that O'Connor "stops meaning at its core, binds it firmly to the specific and concrete."[13] O'Connor's use of the specific and concrete not only does not stop meaning, but actually allows ever-increasing expansion of meaning. For, as Lynch says, the limited concrete is the path to insight.

On the whole, what is comic in the stories does not contradict the serious intent. O'Connor's purpose in forcing an awareness of joyless existences is apparent in her letters and lectures. For example, she compares people whose moral sense has been "bred out" to chickens bred to be wingless. In 1950 she wrote: "I am largely worried about wingless chickens. I feel this is the time for me to fulfill myself by stepping in and saving the chicken but I don't know exactly how."[14] Typically, she uses a homely metaphor to express her concern, and typically her comparison comically diminishes mankind while simultaneously implying the horror of deliberate selective breeding.

Certainly her feminine characters are almost devoid of any pronounced moral sense. Whatever they have is limited to the social mores of their communities. Mrs. Cope of "A Circle in the Fire," for example, cannot imagine Powell's need, but politely offers him food. Mrs. McIntyre cannot comprehend the plight of displaced people. While all the women are not villainesses, enough exist for Robert Drake to ask if, in creating so many, Flannery O'Connor uses a spiritual double standard.[15] His contention is that woman is the guardian of natural order and that any woman who violates natural order is doubly culpable. Drake's point of view can be traced back at least as far as to the concept underlying the character Nature in Le Roman de la rose. Some

twentieth-century critics, however, may feel that Drake places a burden on the female community. Surely no O'Connor woman perverts the natural order to any greater degree than some of her men--Mr. Head, Mr. Pitts, or the driver who picks up Young Tarwater, for instance.

O'Connor herself would probably be as outraged at the suggestion of her use of a "double standard" as she was at much critical comment about her fiction. Regarding Henry James' statement that the young woman of the future would know nothing of mystery or manners, she protests that "he had no business to limit it to one sex."[16] In response to a friend's comment about the "artistic sterility 'that woman is,'" she asserts: "I guess you mean 'can be.' Also what I call a moral basis is a good deal more than a masculine drive."[17] She apparently objects to sexual differentiations, not only in terms of everyday expectations, but also in artistic terms. She specifically maintains: "On the subject of the feminist business, I just never think, that is never think of qualities which are specifically feminine or masculine. I suppose I divide people into two classes: the Irksome and the Non-Irksome without regard to sex."[18] Although O'Connor consciously disavows any sexist biases, certain characteristics such as God-longing, searching, and disruption are assigned to the male in contrast with the smug self-satisfaction and rigidity of the female, as I will show.

O'Connor often satirizes popular sentimentality, particularly the sentimentalizing of mother. Moreover, she certainly shatters traditional ideas of feminine roles. Mothers are frustrated and vindictive; businesswomen are mostly unsuccessful; and intellectuals know nothing. In contrast to such women are the black woman Nelson meets in the back alleys of Atlanta, and Beulah, who tries to comfort Young Tarwater. Although O'Connor is sometimes accused of "vaudevilling" her blacks, these are her only women to embody the spirituality ideally associated with the mother-figure. Of the black woman in "The Artificial Nigger," O'Connor writes, "I meant for her in an almost physical way to suggest the mystery of existence to /Nelson/. . . . Such a black mountain of maternity would give him the required shock."[19] No other O'Connor women fulfill any traditionally feminine roles.

The basic source of both the comedy and terror of the O'Connor women is, I propose to demonstrate, what William F. Lynch calls "the fixed imagination."[20] He calls the mind univocal that sees sameness only. O'Connor's feminine protagonists exhibit this univocal mind riveted to the efficacy of hard work, cleanliness, and a socially stratified society. They never find themselves humorous or consider any possible articles of faith other than the banal clichés they repeat. Such characters can also be described in Bergson's terms of

the requisite rigidity of the comic character.[21]

The angular protagonists often have fat doubles whose visions are fixed unswervingly on the dark side of life. Because these doubles are usually affiliated with the ground in some way, as in Mrs. Greenleaf's embracing the earth, and because their greatest reverence is for disease, disaster, and death, they are characterized as chthonic. Their acknowledgment of the mystery and misery of life contrasts with the bright rational superficialities of the protagonists.

Nearly all the women see life from a single, fixed view. Hulga of "Good Country People" is one character who unquestionably exemplifies what Lynch calls the equivocal mind. He uses the term as a name for the mind that perceives no connections: "With the equivocal, difference, and only difference reigns. . . . Everything is a private world. . . . All is absurd, lonely."[22] Hulga, despite her Ph.D., cannot see the obvious similarities between Mrs. Freeman and the bible salesman.

Contrasted with the univocal and equivocal minds is the analogical, "defender of being against the pure concept or category."[23] As no other genre, comedy reduces mankind to a commonality from which diverse individuals emerge--the analogical imagination, respecting diversity in being or levels of existence, always keeps similarities and distinctions in viable tension. The reader of O'Connor must have this analogical perspective. But only

Ruby Turpin and Mrs. Cope live through a change from a univocal to an analogical framework.

O'Connor's femmes formidables stride through their stories, insisting that their wills be done, tumbling from their self-erected pedestals through some ironic circumstance they themselves create. Most have mean little hearts and tend to minimize important issues while magnifying the trivial. Although their similarities have often been noted, no close analysis of the corpus of O'Connor femininity has been made.

I hope to prove that the common quality binding the feminine characters together is their univocal minds, at once the source of comedy and terror. The degree of univocality varies; contrasts and variations exist; but the constant factor of a sameness in individual obsessive values is always present in the women's stories. The cliché, beloved of the univocal mind, often serves as a structural device. The pun, ironically used to counterpoint the sameness of the characters' perceptions, is another such device. Because the univocal mind is stubbornly fixed, physical violence and the unexpected are necessary to wrench it free. In their unimaginative single-mindedness, nearly all have adopted shallow, unthinking creeds, and it is their beliefs that make the O'Connor women so dreadfully funny, as I will show.

The evidence of the stories indicates that the

women fall into four major archetypes: the farm manager; her chthonic double; the mother or surrogate-mother; and the seductress. Because the farm manager and her double are so closely related, the two types will be discussed together in Chapter I. The protagonists of this group are obsessed with the work ethic. Their stories are: "Why Do the Heathen Rage?" "A Circle in the Fire," "Greenleaf," "The Displaced Person," and "Revelation." With the exception of "Why Do the Heathen Rage?" and "Revelation," each protagonist has a chthonic double who serves to reveal the superficiality of the protagonist while simultaneously dramatizing her own absurdity.

Mothers or surrogate-mothers form a third classification, the subject of Chapter II. The stories containing mother figures, either protagonists or antagonists, are: "The Geranium," "Judgement Day," "A Late Encounter with the Enemy," "A Stroke of Good Fortune," "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," "The Comforts of Home," "The Enduring Chill," "Everything That Rises Must Converge," and "A Good Man Is Hard to Find."

Chapter III treats O'Connor's seductresses. A major subdivision is the intellectual siren found in "The Crop," "The Partridge Festival," and "Good Country People." The non-intellectual seductresses are found in "Parker's Back" and Wise Blood. Some of these women are out to seduce a man's soul rather than his body.

It should be noted that occasionally one of the major types will appear in a minor role in stories featuring another kind of protagonist, as the managerial Mrs. Hopewell is subordinated in Hulga's story. The total impression left after a close reading of all the stories is of an expansive human comedy of women with absurd beliefs that generate terrible consequences--or swift and terrible revelations of what is absurd and what is not.

This is to my knowledge the first systematic study of O'Connor's women characters. Critics have too often lumped the managerial women into a general category of villainesses or noted a general resemblance of the women. The only published article, Louise Westling's "Flannery O'Connor's Mothers and Daughters," is inherently limited.[24] Superficial biographical applications to the stories fail to do justice to O'Connor's art, just as passing observations on the women's similar situations fail to account for the dramatic differences between them. By assigning each woman character to an archetypal group and demonstrating the singularly rigid outlook that each has, I have attempted to clarify the total world view reflected through the women and show how it is assimilated into the world of O'Connor's works.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

[1]"To 'A'," 24 September 1955, in The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979), pp. 105-06.

[2]Ibid., p. 105.

[3]See, for example, Martha Stephens, The Question of Flannery O'Connor (Baton Rouge: L.S.U. Press, 1973), p. 14.

[4]"To 'A'," 25 November 1955 and on 11 June 1960, in The Habit of Being, p. 119 and p. 400.

[5]"To 'A'," 19 October 1957, in The Habit of Being, pp. 247-48.

[6]Flannery O'Connor: A Critical Essay, Contemporary Writers in Christian Perspective Pamphlets (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1966), p. 243.

[7]Christ and Apollo: The Dimensions of the Literary Imagination (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960), p. 7 and p. 161.

[8]William F. Lynch (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1973), p. ix.

[9]"To Father John McCown," 9 May 1956, in The Habit of Being, p. 157.

[10]Christ and Apollo, p. 94.

[11]Ibid., p. 97.

[12]Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, eds., Mystery and Manners (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1957), p. 92 and p. 176.

[13]The World of Flannery O'Connor (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1970), p. 155.

[14]"To Robie Macauley," undated, 1950, in The Habit of Being, p. 21.

[15]"The Paradigm of Flannery O'Connor's True Country," Studies in Short Fiction (Summer, 1969), p. 440.

[16]"To 'A'," 2 August 1955, in The Habit of Being, p. 92.

[17]"To 'A'," 16 December 1955, in The Habit of Being, p. 126.

[18]"To 'A'," 22 September 1956, in The Habit of Being, p. 176.

[19]"To Ben Griffith," 4 May 1955, in The Habit of Being, p. 78.

[20]Christ and Apollo, p. 107.

[21]"Laughter" in Comedy, ed. Wylie Sypher (Garden City: Doubleday, 1956).

[22]Christ and Apollo, p. 130.

[23]Ibid., pp. 107-08.

[24]Twentieth Century Literature 24 (Winter, 1978), 510-22.

CHAPTER I

BUSY BODY AND DEAD SOUL: O'CONNOR'S TWENTIETH-CENTURY MARTHA

In Luke 10:38-42, Jesus chides Martha for fretting over household tasks and commends Mary, her sister, for her rapt attention to his words. Thus, the biblical Martha represents an archetype of the active, energetic woman who keeps a household functioning efficiently, who cares for bodily needs but not for spiritual ones. Usually the Martha and Mary in Luke are felt to be the same as the Martha and Mary in John 11:5-46. There Martha professes her faith--after her brother Lazarus is restored to life. Like her biblical counterpart, O'Connor's Martha figure is concerned with bodily welfare. Recurring in numerous stories, this archetypal character never has time to listen, or refuses to do so. All manage the people around them, and some manage a farm as well. They have faith--in themselves. They hope for salvation--from the shiftless, the idle. Whatever charity they practice is self-serving and condescending. All profess to know reality. Their reality, that of the white Anglo-Saxon work ethic, is shown to be inadequate. Their existences dramatize The Misfit's observation in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" that "it's no real pleasure in life." Their Manichean sensibilities have split the body and soul, and they have forgotten

the soul.

Although "Why Do the Heathen Rage?" is one of O'Connor's last stories and the most fragmentary, it is significant at least as her last re-working of a dour matriarchal Martha. Published in Esquire in July, 1963, the story was described as an excerpt from a forthcoming novel. Perhaps O'Connor felt that she could sustain the Martha figure for the course of a novel. The story typifies the embattled Martha figure in conflict with her intellectual son, engendering the themes of homelessness, of practicality versus spirituality, of action versus passivity commonly found in such stories. Thus, the last brief story typical of the joyless Martha can serve as a model for those preceding it.

The plot is slight. Tilman, Walter's father, returns home after having suffered a stroke. Walter's mother hopes that the crisis will spur Walter into action--to no avail. She objects to his "doing nothing," reading material "that makes no sense for now"; in the climactic last sentence, she realizes, "with an unpleasant little jolt," that Walter has been reading about Jesus, a Jesus who marches to do violence.

We see Walter reflected only through his mother's vision, which shows a person neither actively nor positively engaged in any sort of "marching." He is related to Hulga of "Good Country People" and Julian of "Everything That Rises Must Converge." These adult

offspring, though dissociated from the work ethic or what Walter calls "the last of the nineteenth-century," lack the positive assurance of faith in anything or in nothing, even in themselves. For example, Walter does not sign his name to his letters. In the Judeo-Christian tradition that O'Connor firmly associates herself with, name is all-important. Unlike his forebears, Walter does not know who he is. The sharp contrast between the positive identity of the Martha-mother with the nebulous longings of her adult child is a motif with several variations in the O'Connor canon.

The man that Walter's mother sees is one who "courted good and evil impartially and saw so many sides of every question that he could not move, he could not work, he could not even make niggers work." The anticlimax is funny, but the paralysis described is frightening. Because Walter has the virtue of being a man who reads, the mother seems the undoubted villain. But the evidence indicates that O'Connor had a more complicated business in mind.

Walter, "homeless here and homeless anywhere," acknowledges that he should not presume the place is home in replying to his mother's veiled threat, "if you want to stay here." Man's homeless state is a persistent theme in O'Connor's work. The male characters like Haze Motes in Wise Blood and Mr. Shiftlet in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" search for homes--unlike her

female characters who are notably fixed in place as well as in mind. Thus, when Walter's mother threatens him with a loss of place, she implies a spiritual confinement. The pattern is typical.

The rage of the mother also characterizes Tilman, the father. His left eye (the only reflection of his personality remaining) burns with anger. Tilman apparently belongs to that somewhat sinister group of absent husbands and fathers, recalled as wheeler-dealers on the courthouse lawn. Having done her duty by him, his wife dismisses him early in the story. Husbands are usually dispensable to the Martha figure, mostly being unmourned, unremembered, or unmentioned. Yet a certain ambiguity is expressed here through the wife's consciousness: "The rest of his face was prepared for death. Justice was grim and she took satisfaction in it when she found it. It might take just this ruin to wake Walter up." Whether the justice lies with Tilman's approaching death or with Walter's "awakening" is not clear. Probably the justice lies in both aspects, couched as it is between the two.

The anger of Tilman and his wife forms an ironic postscript to the motto, "Love should be full of anger." It comes from Saint Jerome's letter to Heliodorus, emphasizing the positive action necessary for true faith, a contrast with Walter's seeming paralysis. Not only then does the motto work a double irony, but it serves as the image to refract opposing qualities of two

generations, commonly found in O'Connor's stories dealing with such conflicts.

The appearance of the Martha figure is invariably rigid, emphasizing her fixed univocal attitudes. Walter tells his mother that she looks relaxed "by mistake." Although we have little insight into Walter, we learn that he has some wit as well as understanding of his mother's managerial obsession when he tells her: "You were born to take over. If the old man had had his stroke ten years ago, we'd all be better off. You could have run a wagon train through the Bad Lands. You could stop a mob."

His fervent comparisons are punctured by his mother's assertion that she "is only a woman." Such juxtaposition of traditional frailty often creates a humorous irony in the stories. The technique also punctures any romantic inflation of parental villainy. The resentment of the mother toward Walter's paralyzed state typifies the anger and violence characterizing many of O'Connor's fictional familial relationships, and indeed of families in literature since Sophocles. The mother's determination to keep the homeplace profitable, with everyone on it actively working, is typical of the managerial Martha. She has no time to listen, nor will she allow anyone to contemplate whatever makes "no sense for now."

While Walter's mother exhibits characteristics common to the Martha type, the prototypical Marthas in O'Connor's fictional world are Mrs. May, Mrs. McIntyre, and Mrs. Cope. Each, a single woman managing a farm, struggles against "the weather, the dirt, and the help." Each displays the univocal mind, the imagination fixed upon the efficacy of hard work and cleanliness. Each is obsessed by what Robert Fitzgerald characterizes as "a managerial religion."[1]

Mrs. Cope, the protagonist of "A Circle in the Fire," is the angular, rigid Martha figure who uses a bright, superficial rationalism to parry the dark forebodings of Mrs. Pritchard, an obese lover of misery. This pair of women is one of several in the canon who appear to be exactly opposite in every respect yet merge finally to varying degrees. Moreover, the laxity of the obese figure is sometimes envied by the angular Martha, reflecting a subconscious longing for release.

While Mrs. Cope and Mrs. Pritchard engage in secondary conflicts, Mrs. Cope's real antagonist is a visiting ex-tenant child and his friends who set fire to her place, fulfilling a dread expectation. The consciousness of Mrs. Cope's child, Sally Virginia, furnishes an additional voice.

As the story opens, Mrs. Cope works furiously at the nut-grass as if it were "an evil sent directly

by the devil to destroy the place." Her frenetic activity contrasts with Mrs. Pritchard's lackadaisical swings of the hoe. Even more amusing are Mrs. Cope's attempts to divert Mrs. Pritchard from conversation reflecting a prurient interest in the mechanics of conception in an iron lung. This opening conversation between the two women introduces Mrs. Cope as a woman who unsuccessfully fills her spiritual emptiness by unceasing activity.

Not even that quells her uneasy awareness of some threatening force. The talisman she uses against unseen fate is her constant litany of thanksgiving. Not only does she endlessly chant thanks, she advises everyone else to do the same, even in cases where thanksgiving seems incongruous: She advises Mrs. Pritchard to give thanks for only four abscessed teeth and agrees with that lady's sarcastic remark that the woman in the iron lung could be thankful she was not dead. The great irony of course is that Mrs. Cope acknowledges "the Lord" only as the protector of the righteous, hoping that offering sufficient thanks will protect her from calamity, insulate her from suffering mankind, a regrettable shortcoming of many of the Marthas. In the words of John R. May, Mrs. Cope "could not have known what Thanksgiving actually entailed because she had never shared the common plight of man."[2] This feminine tendency, recurring in several stories, of mindlessly thanking God is undercut by a

reference to Mr. Connin of "The River." Referring to the fact that part of his stomach is removed, his wife quotes him as saying, "He says he ain't thanking nobody." Thus does O'Connor shatter cliched pietistic platitudes.

Mrs. Cope, grateful for what she has, working to keep it, ironically feels her rich land a terrible burden. Typical of the Martha type, she is mastered by the world. In adopting her own version of an elected people, Mrs. Cope rejects the "irony of Christ /which/ involves the mastery of the world."[3]

Because she is in thrall to possessions, her burden is onerous and her dread nameless: "When the seasons changed she seemed almost frightened at her good fortune in escaping whatever it was that pursued her." David Eggenschwiler sees her as having

> the basic qualities of Kierkegaard's pagan hero: . . . an 'omnipotent in-itself,' relying on her own powers; yet she has a troubled awareness of an external power which she posits negatively as that which she cannot control; she is a very small and tidy genius with an unusually large fear. . . . /Her fears/ indicate her defaced wholeness and show the possibility of her salvation.[4]

Sally Virginia, the young daughter, alive to mysterious possibilities, listens for "a sudden shriek in the dark." Her mother, in contrast, exposes "signs and omens for figments of imagination." She lives on what William F. Lynch calls "the level of surfaces and superficiality, above pain and problem, on which . . . we, . . . as a technological nation, /try/ to live." Lynch contrasts the superficial level with a deeper one where pain and chaos are confronted--the human situation. Although Mrs. Pritchard does not confront pain and chaos so much as she immerses herself in it, going "thirty miles for the satisfaction of seeing anybody laid away," she has a truer view than Mrs. Cope's initial one.

Mrs. Cope, however, finally arrives at Lynch's third level, that of total helplessness, the point "to which the mind must come where it realizes it is no match for the full mystery of existence," the level of deepest faith where hope is born.[5] The fire burns away the superficiality of Mrs. Cope's existence, reducing her to the helplessness Lynch describes. Although we do not witness Mrs. Cope's arrival at true faith, we can assume with Eggenschwiler that she contains the possibility of salvation: that out of her total helplessness faith is born.

The structural circle of the story is Mrs. Cope's. Although she makes no journey from place to place, she

metaphorically returns to the beginning--the archetypal pattern of the closed existence--an aged woman, as if she has traveled the labyrinths of the interior self, emerging with the cares of our ancient race. At the beginning, Mrs. Cope, like her hat, is "stiff and bright," cheerfully refusing kinship with woman's miserable generation and death cycle. At the end of the story she wears a face of old misery: "it looked as if it might have belonged to anybody, a Negro or a European or to Powell himself."

Mrs. Cope's staunch determination to avoid prurient gossip is funny. But as the story progresses, her persistent superficiality becomes as irritating and as potentially terrifying, in view of Mrs. Pritchard's ominous warning, as it is annoying to Sally Virginia. Mrs. Cope denies her own feelings in a syrupy cliché of Southern manners: "I think it was real sweet of you boys to visit me." Sally Virginia's forthright declarations of truth counter her mother's deceptions. Mrs. Cope speaks of the "nice, new developments" the boys live in, when they are obviously unbearable. Just as the Grandmother tells The Misfit, "I know you wouldn't . . .," Mrs. Cope says, "I'm sure Powell doesn't use words like that . . . wouldn't do a thing like that." In short, Mrs. Cope denies what is real and unpleasant: She "copes" with reality by denying it, maintaining the superficial level characteristic of O'Connor's variations on Martha.

The hard facts of the boys' lives and the fact that Powell views the farm as a heaven are not realized by Mrs. Cope despite her talk of the "poor boys" and her chatter about gratitude to God. She is oblivious to the spiritual dimension of home, a major identifying characteristic of the Martha type. In response to the little boy's revelation that Powell wants to go to the farm when he dies, Mrs. Cope "look/s/ blank." She reacts by offering them food they do not like.

Mrs. Cope, a good Martha attending bodily needs, cannot guess Powell's real hunger. As a matter of fact, the boys have a suitcase of food that Mrs. Pritchard thinks "they likely stole." The comic conversation of non-sequiturs and misunderstandings between the boys and Mrs. Cope emphasizes the plight of both factions in an objective way that no sentimental treatment could do. O'Connor often engages the Martha character in such a conversation of non-sequiturs that deftly illustrates simultaneously both the comedy and the fright of human failure to understand one another.

Mrs. Cope also refuses to heed Mrs. Pritchard's dire warning that "a boy thirteen year old is equal in meanness to a man twict his age." The boys are provocateurs of an action of grace rather than misunderstood, pathetic heroes. Had Mrs. Cope been filled with grace, they probably would have set the fire anyway.

The poor are neither recipients of condescending sympathy nor objects of sensational exploitation by O'Connor. Several times she remarks in her letters that all human beings are poor, saying that the poor are "oneself first, everybody else second, and the actual poor third." She notes that perhaps "no American can write about the poor the way a European can." She believes that no writer can "sentimentalize the poor and get away with it" and objects to writers "numbering the lice."[6] O'Connor's letters reveal her keen interest in the working people who move on and off the farm where she and her mother lived.

Probably one such tenant had a predeliction for the calamitous as Mrs. Pritchard does. While Mrs. Cope persists in forcing a brittle rationalism, ignoring whatever does not fit that, Mrs. Pritchard insists that life consists only of disease, deformity, and death. With her "ferreting eyes," she serves as a blatant reminder to Mrs. Cope that all is not subject to reason and will. Although Mrs. Pritchard is comic in her obsession with trouble, lacking the balance of an analogical view, she is proved correct in her dire prediction that sometimes troubles come all "at onct." Mrs. Cope, despite her secret dread, always verbally maintains that any problem can be "coped" with by reason and industry. The two exemplify what Lynch describes as errors in dealing with

mankind's lot. He speaks of two ways of imaging mankind's curse: to hide or deny the consequences (as Mrs. Cope does) or to indulge in an obsession with it that has its own kind of joy (as Mrs. Pritchard does).[7]

The consciousness of Sally Virginia, Mrs. Cope's daughter, furnishes an innocent recorder who is neither brightly rational nor darkly pessimistic. She notes that anything cheerful puts Mrs. Pritchard in a bad humor and finds her mother's constant worry tiresome--as well as her conversation. The boys' threat is something of a game to her until she discovers the fire, the realization of her mother's worst fears. Sally Virginia is a typical O'Connor child: independent, resolute, and somewhat "sassy." She is also one of those children symbolically exchanged by their mothers with another of a different social class. Mrs. Cope tells Sally Virginia, "Sometimes you look like you might belong to Mrs. Pritchard!" Such exchanges have two effects: one, a suggestion that the mother has a subconscious realization of human solidarity though she always consciously maintains a social difference. Secondly, and most obviously, it is the mother's way of registering disapproval of the child. The irony is that inevitably the mother is forced into an awareness of human commonality.

The symbolic exchange of children is only one aspect of the mirroring and doubling of Mrs. Cope and Mrs.

Pritchard. Initially, Mrs. Cope's bright hat and cheery outlook contrast with Mrs. Pritchard's faded hat and dark view. The litany of thanksgiving is counterpointed by the catalog of woe. At the end of the story, Mrs. Pritchard, a slow-moving woman, becomes charged with energy while Mrs. Cope is temporarily paralyzed. Resembling Mrs. Pritchard in her new look of "old misery," Mrs. Cope realizes that she is now one of the poor. The old order of the women's lives is purged by fire as their identities merge.

"A Circle in the Fire" proves the truth of Dorothy Tuck McFarland's observation: "O'Connor suggests that to be truly human--to be a 'good man'--is to accept one's mortality and one's solidarity with all human suffering."[8] Mrs. Cope's starched resistance against acknowledging the presence of evil--even in the throes of helplessness against her tormentors--is a comic nightmare of terror. The ending of this story, like others, is Hawthornian in that Mrs. Cope for the first time is plunged into the abyss of suffering from which she will emerge with an understanding of what it means to be human. For, as Eggenschwiler says, all along she has shown the "possibility of salvation."

While delinquents bring light to the woods of Mrs. Cope's farm, a scrub bull is the means of revelation in "Greenleaf." Mrs. May, an embattled Martha, frustrated with her silly sons and the problems of managing a farm, is vindictively resentful of her farm help's children, the Greenleafs. The sons, O. T. and E. T., benefitting by their military service, are in socio-economic ascendancy, leaving the Mays behind--in Mrs. May's view. The scrub bull of O. T. and E. T. wanders down to Mrs. May's place, making a nuisance of himself. Despite warnings, Mr. Greenleaf does not return the bull to his sons. Mrs. May determines that he will shoot the bull; she is instead gored by the animal.

The story, one of O'Connor's richest, has received varying interpretations though she herself rarely comments on it. Frederick Asals calls the almost structurally perfect story "a smaller version of Euripides' Bacchae with Mrs. May as the Pentheus figure whose refusal to acknowledge the essential physical and spiritual terms of life calls down upon her the fittingly ironic punishment of the gods."[9] Asals also shows parallels to "the patient lover" from the Canticle of Canticles and concludes that "the story suggests most strongly (but not exclusively) the Dionysian rites. . . . What is most significantly evoked by the simultaneous marriage and death is that other great mythic spring rite, the Crucifixion."

Appropriately, he goes on to cite Augustine's metaphor of marriage to describe the crucifixion.[10]

What Asals fails to point out is the comic irony of a grey-haired, nearsighted Ariadne. Nearly all such myths have the damsel asleep until she is wakened to life through sexual fulfillment. Furthermore, though the results, her sons, are disappointing, Mrs. May obviously has had sexual experience. It is true that Mrs. May is in a sense dead up to the terrifying moment of her death, but she is dead to a realization of her own miserable lot brought on by her failure to understand the error of stratifying people into classes and by her belief in her "iron hand." At the moment of death she seems "to be bent over whispering some last discovery into the animal's ear," thereby leading us to believe that with death comes revelation to Mrs. May.

Dorothy McFarland finds that "the analogy between the bull and Christ, who is traditionally the divine Bridegroom as well as the sacrificial victim on the cross, is too close to be overlooked."[11] Eggenschwiler recognizes the "danger of breaking the story into different levels. . . . /It/ is unified and does not merely offer something for everyone regardless of where he finds his pleasure."[12] His conclusion is that Mrs. May "becomes aware of God through a symbolic, Dionysian immolation of her self. . . . Demonic characters experience God's mercy through demonic structures that oppose or

caricature their own forms of idolatry."[13] Although Eggenschwiler is quite correct in noting the unity of the story and in objecting to breaking the story into ambivalent interpretations, he errs in making Mrs. May a demonic character in the commonly accepted sense of the word. Mrs. May is an ordinary woman who has certain expectations; when they are not met, she becomes bitter and vengeful.

In a letter written to "A" during the inception of "Greenleaf," O'Connor says that she does not know if she identifies with the bull or with Mrs. May. She further refers to the "risk" of the story. Although the context does not clarify what she means by risk here, perhaps the interpretations are the risk. She often complains of English teachers who "strain the soup too thin" and of critics endlessly debating the phallicism of church spires.[14] On the basis of her letters, I feel that O'Connor would insist that the bull is first and always a Greenleaf bull.

Just as Faulkner's "Spotted Horses" is about the Varners' fall, so is "Greenleaf" a story of the Mays' fall. The resemblance of the Greenleafs to the Snopeses is often noted, and such a comparison helps to illuminate the comic terror of the story. An O'Connor story like "Everything That Rises Must Converge" and her letters show her consciousness of the breakup of the rigid social system of the South occurring during her lifetime.[15]

Although she, like Faulkner, does present the humorous incongruities of the manners of the sharecropping class, unlike him she shows the error of Mrs. May and her ilk who insist upon class superiority, who refuse to accept the solidarity of the human race.

The story opens with Mrs. May's dream occasioned by the presence of the Greenleaf bull outside her window. She has been dreaming of something rhythmically eating away everything on the place but the Greenleafs. Upon awakening, she considers calling Mr. Greenleaf to chase away the bull, but decides against it, knowing that he would say, "If hit were my boys . . . ." The relative merits, or lack thereof, of the Greenleaf boys and of the May boys constitute the basic source of conflict--and humor--in the story. The conflict is focused and concretized in the Greenleaf bull--as comic and as terrible as the reality he symbolizes.

Mrs. May has quite human expectations that her sons, whom she has brought up in middle-class tradition, should cooperate with her to some degree. Typical of most O'Connor adult children, they are arrested emotionally at a preadolescent level of rebellion, though unfortunately not inclined to run away from home. Although both live at home, neither helps. For example, Wesley tells his mother, "I wouldn't milk a cow to save your soul from hell." He hates the farm, the college at which he teaches, and the students, considering himself

superior to his environment. His brother, Scofield, on the other hand, is quite content to sell "nigger insurance" and to harass his mother. Despite the disagreeableness of the two, Mrs. May is unable to outgrow the "mother-knows-best" syndrome, a manifestation of pride so typical of a Martha.

Mrs. May, with her univocal practicality, has no spiritual consolation. She is "a good Christian woman with a large respect for religion who /dŏes/ not believe of course that any of it /ĭs/ true." The contradiction is humorous, with part of the humor deriving from the recognition of universal truth in the statement. The facts of belief are too hard for Mrs. May. She can accept the social morality commonly associated with Christianity; for example, she thinks Wesley and Scofield should go to church where they can meet some nice girls.

In contrast with the Greenleafs who "over the years /āge/ hardly at all," Mrs. May shows the ravages of time: her comical appearance in green rubber curlers, her face as "smooth as concrete with an egg-white paste" reinforces the vanity of her beliefs, of her life. The family net of mutual resentments and the strain of putting up with the Greenleafs have taken their toll: Mrs. May speaks in "a restrained screech that has become habitual" or in "a brittle voice." She resembles a "disturbed bird." She resents Wesley's

sarcastic suggestion that she release her emotions and retain her youth through prayer. Mrs. May and her sons dramatize the humor and horror of family life.

Mrs. May's sole consolation is knowing that "no matter how far /the Greenleaf boys/ go, they came from that"--namely, Mrs. Greenleaf. Although she makes but one brief appearance, her essence pervades the story. Her dirtiness is most offensive to Mrs. May, who thinks of the "dump" Mrs. Greenleaf keeps and dreads the thought that her sons may marry someone like one of the five filthy Greenleaf girls, especially the one who dips snuff.

The "large and loose" Mrs. Greenleaf calls upon Jesus as she pursues her prayer healing. Mrs. May tells her, "Jesus would be ashamed of you. He would tell you to get up from there and go wash your children's clothes." Perhaps no other single scene delineates O'Connor's variation on the biblical Martha so well and nowhere would her sister Mary assume such a bizarre posture in spiritual contemplation. Like Mrs. Pritchard, Mrs. Greenleaf is obsessed with a postlapsarian world, seeing all in terms of the curse. In her dark fashion, she is just as univocal in vision as Mrs. May. "Every day she cut all the morbid stories out of the newspapers": accounts of raped women, escaped criminals, burned children, train wrecks, plane crashes, and divorced movie stars. She prays sprawled out, suggesting sexual overtones, in an incongruous luxury, "a huge

human mound, her legs and arms spread out." Mrs. May suspects that these self-abandonments are followed by sleep. Mrs. Greenleaf's portrait is one of the funniest in O'Connor's canon. Her imperative "Jesus, stab me in the heart," an ironic admonition to a non-violent Jesus, illustrates literally Lynch's idea that comic incidents recall the relation between God and people.[16]

O'Connor's feelings for Mrs. Greenleaf show her own practical acknowledgement of the assumption that loving one's neighbor is not an easy task. She confesses, "I don't love these fat women and I do love Mrs. May, Mrs. Cope, Mrs. Hopewell and Bailey's mother; but old lady Greenleaf was virtuous, you'll have to admit. She prayed for the whole world." Elsewhere she facetiously refers to herself as "Old Doctor Greenleaf."[17]

Eggenschwiler discusses Mrs. Greenleaf as an example of Kierkegaard's superstitious man. Neither the superstitious person nor the unbeliever is free. The superstitious person "cannot be satisfied with faith alone; thus he becomes a magician performing the initiate's gestures to prove, appease, and even coerce God. Unlike the unbeliever, he has a strong sense of mystery, but he also believes that he can control the mysterious."[18] Mrs. May is unconscious of mystery, univocally seeing life in terms she expects. Mrs. Greenleaf mirrors Mrs. May, seeing only a mysterious horror in life that she

attempts to control.

Mr. Greenleaf, reflected through Mrs. May's consciousness, appears diabolical: "He walked with a high-shouldered creep and he never appeared to come directly forward. He walked on the perimeter of some invisible circle." His circuitous approach and evasions exemplify one of Bergson's formulae for comedy, which is apropos of our concern here: "Instead of concentrating our attention on actions, comedy directs it rather to gestures. By gestures we mean the attitudes, the movements and even the language by which a mental state expresses itself."[19] Mr. Greenleaf, slow to act, retorting in his twanging voice, wiping his nose, exemplifies the comedy of gesture.

Mr. Greenleaf is, in a word, shiftless. But for all that, Mrs. May sees him as a "darker shape . . . that might have been the /sun's/ shadow . . . moving among /the cows/." The sun often intrudes against boundaries in crucial passages of O'Connor's stories, becoming a subtle reminder of a detached heavenly eye observing Georgia farm activities. Mr. Greenleaf, the sun's shadow, therefore, is not to be excluded from the brotherhood of man, ridiculous though he is and as deficient in charity as his employer. The sun appears in two crucial scenes of potential recognition on Mrs. May's part prior to her final revelation. In both cases she ignores any alternatives other than the course of revenge that she determines to pursue. She

thus exemplifies the character subject to "the action of grace . . . who is not willing to support it," as O'Connor describes the essence of her stories.[20]

On the day following the bull's visit, Mrs. May receives no help from Mr. Greenleaf or from her sons in getting rid of the scrub animal. So on the second day, she visits the farm of O. E. and E. T. Having equated the Greenleafs with literal dirt, she is surprised to see that the junior Greenleafs are participants in the rites of cleanliness. After seeing the "spotless white concrete room"--a dairy sanctorum--she goes outside: "The light was not so bright but she was conscious that the sun was directly on top of her head, like a silver bullet ready to drop into her brain."

The bullet reappears in her second dream on that same night: "the sun trying to burn through the tree line, . . . a swollen red ball /that/ began to narrow and pale until it looked like a bullet, . . . it burst through the tree line and raced down the hill toward her." Mrs. May, like her kinswoman Mrs. Cope and the typical Martha, is not reflective enough to heed signs and omens; she goes on to pursue her course of revenge, which seems to her the only solution to the problem of the unwanted animal.

Immediately preceding each potential recognition scene, Mrs. May quarrels with her sons. On the day

of her visit to the farm of O. T. and E. T., she learns of their fraternal union--in sharp contrast with her sons' adolescent quarreling. She sees the efficient way in which the farm is run and ignores the black man's query about her being the insurance man's mother. She notes the attractiveness of the Greenleaf grandchildren, knowing the chances of her line continuing seem at best slim since Wesley does not like nice girls, and nice girls do not like Scofield. Mrs. May feels cheated and tells her sons that night that they should have belonged to Mrs. Greenleaf and the twins should have been hers--the pattern of child exchange. Mrs. May is unaware that such an exchange would have been more than enough punishment for Mrs. Greenleaf's slovenness.

The episodes leading to the ritual sacrifice of the bull are structural indicators that the story is concerned with the changing social order of the South. Married to French wives and out of the service, the junior Greenleafs are educated through veterans' benefits and economically surpass the Mays. Mrs. May likes to repeat that if World War II made anyone, it made the Greenleaf boys: "Disguised in their uniforms, they could not be told from other people's children. You could tell, of course, when they opened their mouths but they did that seldom."

Some of the story's humor comes from Mrs. May's ear for language--a kind of social litmus. She complains

of the Greenleaf reticence, a genuine hallmark of backwoods society. When they do speak, she complains of their murdering the King's English--evidently humorous coming from the mouth of a Georgia woman. The language of the Greenleaf grandchildren becomes practically a paternity test. When she asks for the father and the child replies, "He ain't hyar neither," Mrs. May says, "Ahhh, . . . as if something had been proven." She needs the proof, for the cleanliness of the children and the place are contrary to her knowledge of the Greenleafs. This incident culminates the language motif pervading the story. Her sons use Greenleaf language to annoy her, and Mr. Greenleaf's dialect makes her deflations more emphatic. A terrible comic irony lies, therefore, in the fact that Mrs. May learns the truth in a wordless revelation from the Greenleaf bull.

Mrs. May's rigid outlook extends even to her unwitting death preparations. She thinks self-righteously: "Before any judgment seat I can say I've worked, not wallowed." Matching her self-justification is her prophetic "This is the last night I am going to have to put up with this," a neat dramatic irony.

Mrs. May plays God to Mr. Greenleaf, an unwilling Abraham, who must sacrifice his sons' possession. In agony he wipes first his hands, then his nose: "Ain't

nobody ever ast me to shoot my boys' own bull!" Mr. Greenleaf's ignorance of the fact that his sons want the bull destroyed, his thinking it valuable, his dripping nose, and ludicrous accents make him a pathetically funny figure and Mrs. May a disagreeable vindicator. The specific concrete reference to bodily function suggests Lynch's discussion of the graphic details of Zossima's stench in The Brothers Karamazov. He uses that phenomena to illustrate the artist's use of the concrete to show arrival at truth through a descent into reality as opposed to abstract argumentation.[21]

Mrs. May knows that Mr. Greenleaf is in distress, which puts her in a lighthearted mood for the first and only time in the story. Gloating in her cruel joke, aware that Mr. Greenleaf would like to shoot her, the little grey-haired mother is at once ludicrous and frightening in her capacity for revenge on one who is innocent of the true cause of her deep-seated resentment. While Mr. Greenleaf has gone his usual evasive route, chasing the bull instead of shooting it, Mrs. May engages in her last imaginary conversation with him: "It's your own boys who are making you do this, Mr. Greenleaf. . . . If those boys cared a thing about you, Mr. Greenleaf, they would have come for that bull." Here she says what Mr. Greenleaf usually says about her children, thinking that she finally has won a round

in the competition of parents.

Mrs. May, of course, never wins a round with the Greenleafs. Her univocal view prevents her from seeing any irony, any humor in her situation. Intent on excluding the Greenleafs--with their dirt, bad grammar, and embarrassing beliefs--from respectable society, she is symbolically wedded to them in a final solidarity, for the bull is first and always a Greenleaf bull.

Rational man unable to cope with irrational beast is a stock situation, particularly of American comedy. The comic, tenacious bull tends too often to evoke romantic interpretations. For example, Gilbert Muller misleadingly states that Mrs. May "immediately sends Mr. Greenleaf to shoot the bull, intent as she is on disrupting the natural environment" as that "symbol of magical and mystical forces of nature grazes peacefully."[22] The evidence of the story contradicts Muller's "immediately"; Mrs. May is more intent on a night's sleep, profitable management, and revenge than she is on disruption. A scrub bull to anyone familiar with the phenomenon (as O'Connor was) signifies tough steaks and lowered productivity. Criticism dependent upon myth and allegory loses sight of the realistic comedy of Southern manners, with the accompanying horror of woman trying unsuccessfully to control her life armed only with her inadequate rationalism.

Where the two women in "Circle in the Fire" reverse

roles, Mrs. May's merging with the Greenleafs takes a more violent form. But even she and Mr. Greenleaf exchange characteristics. She remains "perfectly still" while Mr. Greenleaf runs and shoots efficiently, contrary to his usual wont. Although Mrs. Greenleaf appears but once in the story, and then as part of Mrs. May's reflection, we still sense the latter's unconscious envy of the fat woman's relaxation, her comparative youthfulness, and her sons. Thus when Wesley advises his mother to find an emotional outlet through prayer, his barb is not without some basis.

The compression of the story allows the reader to follow the progress of Mrs. May from an ordinary farm manager and mother, beset with ordinary problems, to a vengeance-seeking instance of Northrop Frye's individual who "finds his identity in seeing his own self-hatred reflected in the torment and humiliation of others."[23] Comic and terrible, Mrs. May fails in her attempt to torment the Greenleafs for having the kind of children she wanted.

While "Greenleaf" dramatizes the shifting social classes of the post-World-War-II South, presenting the inexorable rise of the sharecropping class, "The Displaced Person" presents a different inroad into static provincialism. A displaced Pole arrives on Mrs. McIntyre's dairy farm, honest, efficient, exacting

the same standards of black and white. The original story published in 1954 has the sharecropper's chthonic wife, Mrs. Shortley, as the main reflector, with that version ending in her death. The final version published in 1956 has two additional parts with Mrs. McIntyre, the Martha figure, as the main reflector. With the addition, Mrs. McIntyre becomes the protagonist of the story.

Mrs. Shortley is the most complex of the chthonic doubles, undergoing a change from a primeval paganess who has everything under control in her red-clay domain prior to the arrival of Mr. Guizac to an ignorant prophetess of the Apocalypse when her ridicule of the Guizacs turns to fear. In Parts II and III, Mrs. McIntyre, indecisive and somewhat more intelligent than the Shortleys, becomes overwhelmed by her bigotry. At first she perceives Mr. Guizac as her salvation from her inefficient help and ensuing poverty, but he becomes her damnation as she eventually assents in his death. The story features a homeless male who disrupts the primeval calm of an essentially feminine atmosphere, but of these models, Mr. Guizac is the most heroic.

Mrs. McIntyre, like the other managerial Marthas, struggles with the land and the shiftless help until Mr. Guizac "saves" her through his efficiency and industry. Typical of the O'Connor character, she cannot support such grace and turns against her benefactor.

The comedy derives from the ignorance of the secluded local populace, an ignorance leading to the intense hatred that results in Mr. Guizac's death.

Mrs. Shortley dominates the opening scene, setting the mood and tone. She appears like a giantess whose slumber has been disturbed--the somnolence indeed of a whole area--and prepares to repel any invasion of her primeval territory:

> She might have been the giant wife of the countryside, come out at some sign of danger to see what the trouble was. She stood on two tremendous legs, with the grand self-confidence of a mountain, and rose, up narrowing bulges of granite, to two icy blue points of light that pierced forward, surveying everything. She ignored the white afternoon sun which was creeping behind a ragged wall of cloud as if it pretended to be an intruder and cast her gaze down the red clay road that turned off from the highway.

Mrs. Shortley's "icy-blue" eyes and granite image indicate her merciless attitude toward the intruding foreigner. The woman is a symbol of the collective rural fortress against any assaulting changes in customs and ideas. The "creeping afternoon sun . . . pretending to be an intruder" is, however, an O'Connor indicator that such fortifications will eventually fall. Just as Mr. Greenleaf is associated with the sun and the Greenleaf/May barrier is dissolved, so here does the presence of the sun indicate the presence of grace,

a divine observer.

Mrs. Shortley is aware that she and her husband are threatened by close scrutiny. He runs an illegal still, unknown to the employer, Mrs. McIntyre. Prior to Mr. Guizac's arrival, the Shortleys are secure because Mrs. Shortley, the most aggressive of all the obese confidantes, enjoys a favored position with Mrs. McIntyre and is quite capable of manipulating that most dependent of all Marthas.

Much of the comedy of rural manners is furnished by Mrs. Shortley. She conjectures whether the Guizacs will "know what colors even is" since "they can't talk."[24] The provincialism of the area at the time of the story is further illustrated by Mrs. Shortley's query: "You reckon he can drive a tractor when he don't know English?" Throughout the story Mrs. Shortley refers to the "advanced" state of America in contrast to Europe--an irony that is at first amusing.

Initially, Mrs. Shortley reassures herself by acting out her superior role as mentor to the blacks on the place. She explains to Astor what a displaced person is: "They ain't where they were born at and there's nowhere for them to go--like if you was run out of here and wouldn't nobody have you." Astor's reply deflates the implied threat by dispensing with theoretical conjecture: "It seem like they here. If

they here, they somewhere." Unable to argue with that profundity, Mrs. Shortley registers irritation with the "illogic of Negro thinking." Not only does this scene serve to emphasize Mrs. Shortley's role as a controlling force and clarify further the comedy of manners, but the emphasis on here gives a semantic focus to the univocal mind of Mrs. Shortley and later, in Part II, of Mrs. McIntyre. In their respective parts, both women are obsessed with a contrast of the advanced here and the there of boxcars and degeneration. Having the more active imagination and certainly greater leisure, Mrs. Shortley reflects an almost constant obsession with the invasion of here.

That obsession, together with her comic confusion about Guizac's efficiency without the benefit of what she calls "English," leads to Mrs. Shortley's vision in which words are personified in a grim caricature of human action: "The Polish words, dirty and all-knowing and unreformed, flinging mud on the clean English words until everything was equally dirty. She saw them all piled up in a room, all the dead dirty words." John R. May succinctly characterizes the passage: "Words are reified, linking personal trauma with history and myth. Mrs. Shortley . . . anticipates a confrontation of languages that relates the Tower of Babel to Auschwitz."[25] The relation of the Tower of Babel to Auschwitz in a

backwoods Georgia mind compresses the spatial and temporal history of evil; one realizes how, ironically, the horrors of history have begun with petty fears and territorial prerogatives such as those specified in the microcosm of the small dairy farm. Mrs. Shortley's terribly comic visualization of the word war ends in the history-haunted image of "all the dead dirty words"--with Mrs. Shortley totally oblivious to the dirtiness of her own prejudiced words.

The scene exemplifies the layers of complexity found in O'Connor's best writing. That she drew caricatures and cartoons is well-known; Richard Pearce devotes a chapter in his Stages of the Clown to the relationship between her fiction and caricature. Her visual cartoon contributes a surrealistic humor to the story; that it is pictured by an ignorant woman adds irony. Puzzled and fearful of what she does not understand, Mrs. Shortley renders the abstract comprehensible through imagery analagous to the cinema newsreel, her only contact, however understood, with the world outside her once peaceful domain. Here the comedy is not distinct from the horror of history, but it does detach the reader for a time from the full pathos, eventually realized, not only of the human condition, but also of Mrs. Shortley's version of it--her ignorance and her terror. Finally the recognition comes that "we are all the

poor"--in understanding and in courage. Mrs. Shortley's vision is a preliminary to her eventual realization that she needs more than her own energy to cope with the threat imposed by the Guizacs.

Although we laugh at Mrs. Shortley's astonishment in finding that the Poles look "like other people" and at her standing "far enough away so that the man would not be able to kiss her hand," her comedy of manners is soon enveloped into the apocalyptic seriousness of the unfolding narrative. Before being threatened by the Guizacs, Mrs. Shortley feels that "religion /ɪ̄s/ essentially for those people who /d̄on't/ have the brains to avoid evil without it." But when she observes Guizac's industry and knows she is losing her favored position at Mrs. McIntyre's right hand, Mrs. Shortley comes to believe in the devil: "Every time Mr. Guizac smiled, Europe stretched out in Mrs. Shortley's imagination, mysterious and evil, the devil's experiment station." With her awareness of evil on a fairly abstract plane, Mrs. Shortley is the most complex of the obese clan of chthonic doubles to the angular protagonists.

In fact, Mrs. Shortley is the only member of that class to undergo a change during the course of the story prior to the final merging of the pairs of women. Once she realizes her own energy is insufficient to cope with the Guizac threat and all the Satanic powers,

she turns to religion--the Book of the Apocalypse: "She was aware that the Lord God Almighty had created the strong people to do what had to be done and she felt that she would be ready when she was called." Mrs. Shortley thus assumes the role of prophet, an ironically funny role for such an ignorant woman, but at the same time a frightening one.

Her spleen is directed at Father Flynn, the one principally responsible for bringing in the displaced persons. Mrs. Shortley perceives him as the devil's agent in "leading foreigners over in hordes to places that were not theirs, to cause disputes, to uproot niggers, to plant the Whore of Babylon in the midst of the righteous!" The image of the huge woman hiding--however successfully one can only imagine--and spying on the priest is at once ludicrous and sinister.

Her spying and prophesying end, however, when she learns that she and her family will be fired--the occurrence that turns comedy into terror and that leads to her vision of analogical possibility. Loaded into their crowded, dilapidated vehicle, the family moves on. Mrs. Shortley suffers an apoplectic attack, perhaps occasioned by her anger. The scene is presented from the viewpoint of the Shortley children: "Their mother, with her huge body rolled back still against the seat and her eyes like blue-painted glass seemed to contem-

plate for the first time the tremendous frontiers of her true country." Since she seems to contemplate for the first time her true country, in contrast with her introduction as "the giant wife of the countryside come out at some sign of danger," we assume that Mrs. Shortley undergoes at the moment of her violent death some revelation more precise than her interpretation of the Book of Revelation. In any case her death makes her a martyr to her husband. Her role is a parody of John the Baptist's. Mrs. Shortley's prophesying comes to fruition with the further efforts of her husband. Mrs. Shortley's vision that the Poles would contaminate the pristine quality of her country is ironically inverted. Mr. Guizac is sacrificed because of the inhabitants' base, dark fears. His death ultimately causes the microcosmic dairy farm to dissolve--and, by extension, an entire way of life--with the main actors dispersing into a less cohesive world.

Mr. Guizac is the only hired help who is different from an endless stream preceding him. "We can get along without them. We've seen them come and seen them go--black and white," Mrs. McIntyre tells Astor, suggesting the sameness of existence even in the midst of constant movement. She thinks of "the Ringfields and Collins and Jarrells and Perkins and

Pinkins and Herrins and God knows what all else" who leave of their own volition, usually taking something with them--one family even steals the angel from the tombstone of her late husband. She also reflects that "the niggers don't leave--they stay and steal," leaving her with only "the dirt under /her/ feet."

Mrs. McIntyre exhibits an ironic bravado in claiming to "hold all the strings together" on the place. In the privacy of the late Judge's study, however, she admits to being one of the poorest people in the world. Moreover, she never fires anyone despite her threats. Until the arrival of Mr. Guizac, Mrs. McIntyre suffers "a succession of tenant farmers and dairymen, . . . moody unpredictable Negroes, . . . the incidental bloodsuckers, cattle dealers and lumber men and the buyers and sellers of anything." Like the other Marthas, Mrs. McIntyre is something of a Pelagian, believing her own energies and free will sufficient, never admitting a need for grace to cope with her problems.

Mrs. McIntyre is different, however, from Mrs. May or Mrs. Cope in that she has fond memories of her first husband, the late Judge, a unique member of the courthouse gang of dead husbands in the canon. While one of the Judge's successors is in an asylum and another an intoxicated absentee, the Judge is always

"at home, grinning in his grave." Mrs. McIntyre approves of Mrs. Shortley's quoting his proverb: "The devil you know is better than the devil you don't." She even keeps peacocks in his memory, though she considers them just more mouths to feed. In short, Mrs. McIntyre displays more traditional feminine dependence than the other Martha figures do. The more usual O'Connor pattern is to place women in an orbit quite independent of any need for men, at least as partners. The masculine force as such is, on the contrary, an intrusive, disruptive factor in several instances.

At first Mrs. McIntyre believes Mr. Guizac is her salvation from the "sorry hordes" with whom she has had to contend. Her recognition of a saving force ironically coincides with Mrs. Shortley's recognition of a threat. Mrs. McIntyre looks for economic salvation as Mrs. Shortley turns to the Book of Revelation. The catalyst causing all the upheaval, Mr. Guizac, merely does his job--well.

When the Shortleys leave the McIntyre place, they take a secret with them that Mrs. McIntyre learns only after their departure: the news that Mr. Guizac is arranging a marriage between the dim-witted Sulk and his own sixteen-year-old niece in a camp for displaced persons. Mrs. McIntyre firmly ends the proposed plan.

The shock of discovering that the person she considers her salvation has proposed such an unspeakable, even unthinkable, plan causes her to disintegrate completely. Mrs. McIntyre is so absolutely univocal in her racism that she cannot forget or forgive Mr. Guizac for even thinking of such a plan. This rigidity makes possible the terror of a conspiracy to murder.

When Chancey Shortley returns, he returns not to the woman he carefully concealed his bootlegging operation from and showed some respect for, but to one totally vulnerable. Mrs. McIntyre tolerates his flagrant disregard of her careful rules for the dairy and his outrageously bigoted remarks. Mr. Shortley continues the prophesying begun by his late wife, but in an even uglier fashion masks his hatred for the Pole behind the guise of patriotism. He compares Mr. Guizac to a German soldier. When Mrs. McIntyre faintly protests his confusion of the two nationalities, he replies, "It ain't a great deal of difference in them two kinds," reflecting a perfect <u>reductio ad absurdum</u> of the univocal mentality. Mr. Shortley's ignorant advice is ironically truthful. Neither he nor Mrs. McIntyre, however, will ever arrive at an analogical understanding of essential human solidarity.

Mr. Shortley assumes the role of mentor to Mrs. McIntyre just as his wife had done with the blacks.

Under his steady pressuring, Mrs. McIntyre is torn between wanting to keep the displaced person to get as much work as she can from him and wanting to discharge him outright. She complains to Father Flynn, the object of Mrs. Shortley's original surveillance. Fascinated with the beauty of the peacocks and concerned with a place for the homeless, Father Flynn is a failure as a listener. He is unable to help Mrs. McIntyre resolve her dilemma, giving "a great ugly bellow" at her tirade on money. The long string of sentences, each beginning "she told him," emphasizes the boring quality of the woman's conversation, even creating humor out of the typicality of her obsessive concern. But because the reader understands the ugliness of Mrs. McIntyre's Scylla and Charybdis of greed and revulsion (while Father Flynn does not), the tedious rhythm of Mrs. McIntyre's conversation yields the tension preceding an impending disaster.

Her dream conversation with the priest brings to the surface her inner conflicts. It too is an example of the perfect blending of nightmare terror and comic non-sequiturs, paralleling Mrs. Shortley's vision of the war of the words. In the dream conversation, Mr. Guizac is confused with Jesus Christ. Mrs. McIntyre's attitude is similar to that of The Misfit: "He's extra and he's upset the balance around here, and

I'm a logical practical woman and there are no ovens here and no camps and no Christ Our Lord." Mrs. McIntyre, like Mrs. May, disregards the potential meaning of her dream, further hardening her heart. "The next morning," we are told, "she made up her mind."

Mrs. McIntyre's univocal mind can perceive the priest only as one of those numerous "sellers of something" with whom she has to contend. The peacock, Mr. Guizac, and Jesus Christ are each "just one too many." The intrusion of Mr. Guizac and his shocking proposal upset the appearance of balance she precariously maintains. Her determinedly univocal interpretation and rigid notion of balance is darkly humorous as well as sinister.

Her dream-insistence that Jesus Christ is not present here is obviously and ironically true, for only Mr. Guizac reflects--like Jesus--a view of the dignity of man and so is ignored the way a total stranger would be. Father Flynn, abstract and transcendental, ignores worldly problems. The remaining characters belong to the same countryside, linked to the present through Mrs. McIntyre, whose only concerns are of her world.

Her cardinal sin is not her prohibition of the marriage arrangements. After all, Sulk is dim-witted; in saying that the girl probably will not come, he shows that he too is not prepared for the reality of miscegenation in post-war rural Georgia. Mrs. McIntyre's

sin is her failure to act. Her passivity makes possible the sacrifice of Mr. Guizac. Realistic in her pretensions, fears, and concerns, she also represents the mass of humanity passively permitting evil. In listening to the vengeful Mr. Shortley and in tolerating his presence, she shares the participatory guilt of those who permitted Auschwitz and who daily permit horrors of bigoted hatred nurtured in whatever provincial soil. Her guilt is the greater because she has the sense to recognize Mr. Shortley's absurdities.

Mrs. McIntyre's attitude affects the blacks. When they sense that the Shortleys are low in Mrs. McIntyre's esteem, they take on the same attitude. When she disintegrates, allowing Mr. Shortley to do as he pleases, they fall in with him. In fact, they find his shiftless ways easier to live with than Mr. Guizac's demanding expectations. Sulk is receptive to Mr. Shortley's "Revenge is mine," much as any weak-minded inhabitant of Eden heeds the serpent. The irony is that Sulk enters a conspiracy against Mr. Guizac just as he entered the marriage arrangement with him--with no thought.

The motif of prophecy is constant in the story. Just as Mrs. Shortley's sense of danger leads her into a parody of the prophetic role that her husband continues, Mrs. McIntyre, in failing to reason clearly and in

rejecting the grace of her dream vision, follows the Shortleys' lead in all its comically dreadful ignorance. She confuses the droning truths of the old priest with a sales pitch, hearing only the voices of her innate hatred of whatever is different.

Kathleen Feeley contrasts two prophetic roles in the story:

> /Mrs. Shortley/, a false prophet wedded to the countryside, finds her "true country" in death; a true prophet whose life is conformed to spiritual reality, Mr. Guizac abides in his true country. . . . Although he hardly speaks, he evokes the hostility of the people around him because he orders his life to a reality they cannot grasp.[26]

It is a humorous irony that Guizac is an alien on the farm on a practical plane precisely because of his efficiency, honesty, and expectations of racial equality, which are totally opposite local practice in each respect. The grim irony is that he has not the remotest idea of the draconian beliefs of those who live on the McIntyre place.

Following Mr. Guizac's death, Mrs. McIntyre enters a somnambulist trance, ironically having all the time she never had before, listening to Father Flynn's droning, never comprehending. Dantean echoes resound from her Purgatory of waiting. The microcosmic dairy farm disappears: Mr. Guizac's sacrifice destroys the old order of the red clay country particularized by

the McIntyre farm.

Lacking the tragic aspects of "The Displaced Person," Ruby Turpin's story is one of the most thoroughly comic in the canon. Although she shares the belief in hard work and the class system typical of O'Connor's Martha type, she, unlike the other Marthas, is fat, is fond of her living husband, and has a sense of humor that perhaps is the grace enabling her to live through the saving recognition of her errors.

The story opens in a doctor's office that Ruby Turpin dominates physically through sheer size. She attempts to dominate the conversation as well, allying with a "nice lady" against a small woman whom Ruby categorizes as "white trash." The conversation of the three women consists of ego-gratifying, banal, status-establishing remarks, enraging Mary Grace, the daughter of the "nice lady." Finally, Mary Grace clouts Ruby Turpin, terminating the conversation. Ruby returns to her farm, outraged at being singled out by the girl as an "old wart hog," nursing the identifying protuberance on her forehead. While fuming at the hogpen, she has an amazing vision that reverses all her previously held notions. Those notions are, of course, typical of Martha--that the virtuous consist of hard-working, clean Anglo-Saxons who do not read much.

The cramped space of the doctor's office provides a tense atmosphere for the first half of the story. Mrs. Turpin is "a living demonstration that the room is inadequate and ridiculous." Added to her overwhelming presence is the ugly clutter of "a plastic fern in a gold pot," and the conversation piece, the S & H green-stamp clock. The suffocatingly close atmosphere intensifies with the increasingly banal conversation between the three women. The "white-trash" woman maintains her superiority by staunchly asserting that she would neither "love no niggers" nor "scoot down no hogs." Ruby both retorts silently and persists orally in attempts to establish her hierarchical values. The "nice lady" avails herself of an opportunity for a sermonette to her daughter.

Certainly O'Connor has produced some of the sharpest dialogue to delineate her characters. Banal conversation occurs in every story with major feminine characters. And in all cases, as O'Connor herself wrote to John Hawkes, "these old ladies exactly reflect the banalities of the society and the effect is of the comical rather than the seriously evil."[27] Although banality in itself may not be evil, it furnishes an opportunity for evil to flourish. Mrs. McIntyre's story is such an example. Ruby Turpin, however, exemplifies neatly the comedy of the banal, especially since the violence of

the message she receives saves her from her false credo.

Mrs. Turpin evidences delusions of grandeur as she sings along with the gospel music in the waiting room. With the line, "When I looked up, He looked down," Mrs. Turpin looks down and begins to classify the occupants of the room on the basis of their footwear. She always "notices people's feet," because she concentrates on whatever she can compare herself favorably with--pleasant disposition, industry, cleanliness. Just prior to singing, she thinks of the trashy lady, "Worse than niggers any day." In her mind she turns Jesus into a supply sergeant, issuing various skins. Then she has him playing the tempter, offering her wealth and a graceful figure, which she rejects in favor of virtue: "Make me a good woman and it don't matter what else, how fat or how ugly or how poor!" Her every thought comically contradicts her fantasizing as she congratulates herself on her smooth skin and good patent leather shoes. Ruby's confusion of herself with God is typical of the Martha type, but her confusions are more thoroughly comical than those of the others.

Although Mary Grace's loss of control has something of the terror of the human condition, even it has its comic side, making her a sympathetic character. She is Hulga of "Good Country People" at an earlier

age and under another name. A likeable ingrate, she finally explodes as a result of enduring so much silly conversation. In a letter, O'Connor expresses pleasure in Maryat Lee's statement that "Flannery loves /Mary Grace/."[28] Certainly she must have sympathized with the girl's annoyance at the lectures on smiling, for O'Connor several times satirizes belief in the efficacy of smiling: "Blessed are the smilers; their teeth shall show" is one such example.[29] Contrary to the opinions of some critics, O'Connor wrote, "I wasn't thinking of Mary Grace as the devil."[30] The story was conceived in a visit to a doctor's office, according to O'Connor: "The last time I went to the doctor here, Ruby and Claud were in there."[31] One wonders whether some small part of O'Connor's keen intellect was not working for a brief moment like that of a rebellious adolescent.

At any rate, the tedious conversation of "Revelation" is so well-wrought that Mary Grace's action becomes reasonable, even heroic. The thin line between sanity and insanity is most pointed in this story, though the question of sanity is implied in several stories. In this respect, O'Connor's fiction is in the mainstream of the twentieth century and, at the same time, hearkens back to Poe's humorous tales, which she acknowledges reading and

relishing.[32] The most telling comment comes from the white-trash woman's exclamation: "Thank Gawd I ain't no lunatic," provoking the reader to ponder defintions.

Following the assault upon her, Ruby Turpin gradually comes to realize that her univocal values are wrong. Sobered into a more balanced perspective, she realizes, in seeing Claud's truck from the hogpen, that it is a tiny thing subject to being shattered at any moment, an analogy to the shattering of her abstract value system. Thus softened, with the bump on her head identifying "an old wart hog," she undergoes a comic recognition scene unsurpassed in any literature. At the hogpen, O'Connor's "female Jacob" has a vision not of angels and ladders, but of a heavenly procession led by white trash, blacks, and lunatics--with people of common sense like the Turpins bringing up the rear.

In the words of Dorothy McFarland, Ruby Turpin realizes that "for her to rise, to follow even at the end of the heaven-bound procession, it is necessary for her virtues to be burned away, for her to see herself as no more worthy of God's grace than those she habitually looks down upon."[33] In Lynch's terminology, she transcends "the special irony of the elite who declare that they alone are on the inside of words and things" to an acceptance of the

"whole of faith able to keep the expected and the unexpected together."[34]

Beginning with Ruby Turpin's entrance into the small office and continuing through the course of the story, perspectives are manipulated. For example, immediately after being hit, Ruby Turpin sees everything "as if it were happening in a small room far away, or as if she were looking at it through the wrong end of a telescope; . . . /then her/ vision suddenly reversed itself and she saw everything large instead of small." Although Ruby Turpin's story is pure comedy, her vision helps to define the archetypal Martha of the stories; Lynch's use of the same analogy to contrast tragedy and comedy is illuminating: "Comedy turns the telescope around so that the eye looks through the greater end, and everything has become, not sea incarnadine, but a disconcertingly small puddle."[35] The Martha figure, limited in her univocal view, sees her small puddle as the whole world. The reader, however, perceives the pettiness of the character's mind and world. The discrepancy between the two creates much of the humor. Ruby Turpin's abrupt reversals of perspectives signal the dislocation of her stubborn viewpoints, foreshadowing her final vision where, topsy-turvy, the last are first.

Related to Mrs. Turpin's telescopic perception/

experience are the mergings of dreaming and waking in "Greenleaf" and "The Displaced Person." Henri Bergson's theory of the relationship of comic logic to dream logic seems apposite here. He states that the function of laughter is to "convert rigidity into plasticity, to readapt the individual to the whole."[36] Bergson explains, moreover, that a "sane madness" is necessary for comedy: this "sane madness" is a "special inversion of common sense. It consists in seeking to mould things on an idea of one's own. . . . The comic character always errs through obstinacy of mind or of disposition." According to his theory, dreams have the same logic because they are prompted by some experience in the dreamer's world: "The mind of the dreamer, enamoured of itself, now seeks in the outer world nothing more than a pretext for realising its imaginations."[37]

Bergson's theory fits both the comedy and the dreams of the Martha protagonists. Comical in their rigid univocality, their dreams of life have a nightmarish quality. The dreams of Mrs. McIntyre and Mrs. May project their waking cares; on the other hand, when Ruby Turpin sees small things large and vice versa, her world view begins changing. Once she realizes her proper size in the universal scheme, implicitly acknowledging that she may indeed be an

"old wart hog," she breaks the bonds of univocality. Only she and perhaps Mrs. Cope survive a terrible action of grace to achieve an analogical value system.

Mrs. Cope, Mrs. May, and Mrs. McIntyre, the other archetypal Martha protagonists, at first appear in full control of their domains, though in reality they are controlled by anxieties or by other people. The illusions of peaceable kingdoms are shattered, however, by the intrusions of male forces: the delinquent boys, a scrub bull, Mr. Guizac. In each case, the familiar order is acceptable according to unenlightened principles: small, narrow, clichéd. In each story, the sun appears in conjunction with the arrival of the intruders. Thus, consciously or not, O'Connor equates enlightenment with the masculinity that destroys the neat domains of the Marthas.

The fact that Ruby Turpin's world includes her husband, Claud, and that her stubborn univocality is literally dislodged by a female assailant rather than by an intrusive male force is a major factor in the total comedy of the story. The swift, unexpected assault precludes any developing conflicts with tragic consequences.

In delineating the failings of the protagonists who hold the work ethic and class system as the highest good, O'Connor has created her own mythopoeic

canon, using the texture and idiom of the South to extend a universal significance. In Northrop Frye's categories of heroes, the hero of the ironic mode gives the reader "the sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration, or absurdity, . . . still true when the reader feels that he is or might be in the same situation, as the situation is being judged by the norms of a greater freedom."[38] The Martha figure, in bondage to what she thinks she controls, is certainly frustrated inasmuch as she is in an absurd situation, at the mercy of child or beast. The point of view and the tone of the stories also fit Frye's definition of the ironic as beginning in "realism and dispassionate observation." His five categories have a circular motion in that the last, the ironic, tends to move upwards toward myth, and "dim outlines of sacrificial rituals and dying gods begin to reappear in it."[39] O'Connor, along with Joyce and James whom Frye cites, creates her own ironic myths: hers are of the dying gods of the South and of the dying god of amelioration through reason and energy. Few writers give us "the figure of the scapegoat ritual and the nightmare dream" equal to those in the stories of the Martha protagonists.

Although William F. Lynch uses irony in quite a

different sense than does Frye, the definitions of both work in relation to O'Connor's fiction. According to Lynch, the ironic image is necessary to a true faith: faith is not real without the guide of irony; and irony needs the control of faith.[40] The Martha figure herself initially has no faith except in her own energy and in the status quo. Neither does she perceive any ironies in life. The reader, however, is forced into an awareness of multiple ironies rooted in the truth of the character and of her terrible ontology--whether in the well-developed Ruby Turpin or in the brief sketch of Walter's mother of "Why Do the Heathen Rage?"

NOTES

CHAPTER I

[1]"The Countryside and the True Country," Sewanee Review, LXX (1962), 389.

[2]The Pruning Word: The Parables of Flannery O'Connor (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1976), p. 82.

[3]William F. Lynch, Images of Faith: An Exploration of the Ironic Imagination, p. 101.

[4]The Christian Humanism of Flannery O'Connor (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1972), pp. 36-7.

[5]Christ and Apollo (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1906), p. 79.

[6]"To 'A'," 21 August 1955, in The Habit of Being, pp. 95-6.

[7]Images of Faith, p. 159.

[8]Flannery O'Connor (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1976), p. 22.

[9]"The Mythic Dimensions of Flannery O'Connor's 'Greenleaf'," Studies in Short Fiction, 5 (Summer, 1968), 329.

[10]Ibid., pp. 320-22, 327.

[11]Flannery O'Connor, p. 50.

[12]The Christian Humanism of Flannery O'Connor, p. 63.

[13]Ibid., p. 64.

[14]"To 'A'," 13 January 1956, in The Habit of Being, p. 129.

[15]The Habit of Being, pp. 193-94 and in a letter to "A," 16 April 1960, p. 390.

[16]Christ and Apollo, p. 109.

[17]"To 'A'," 7 April 1956, in The Habit of Being, p. 150.

[18]The Christian Humanism of Flannery O'Connor, p. 66.

[19]"Laughter" in Comedy, p. 152.

[20]"To 'A'," 4 April 1958, in The Habit of Being, p. 275.

[21]Christ and Apollo, pp. 24-5.

[22]Nightmares and Visions: Flannery O'Connor and the Catholic Grotesque (Athens, Georgia: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1972), pp. 83-4.

[23]The Stubborn Structure: Essays on Criticism and Society (Ithaca, New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 1970), p. 35.

[24]Here is but one example of O'Connor's assimilation into her fiction of overheard conversation. In a letter she quotes the same words uttered by a tenant on the O'Connor place. "To Sally and Robert Fitzgerald," Christmas, 1951 in The Habit of Being, p. 30.

[25]The Pruning Word, p. 90.

[26]Flannery O'Connor: Voice of the Peacock (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1972), p. 75.

[27]14 April 1960, in The Habit of Being, p. 389.

[28]"To 'A'," 17 May 1964, in The Habit of Being, p. 578.

[29]"To 'A'," 30 October 1955, in The Habit of Being, p. 114.

[30]"To 'A'," 6 December 1963, in The Habit of Being, p. 552.

[31]Ibid.

[32]"To 'A'," 28 August 1955, in The Habit of Being, p. 98.

[33]Flannery O'Connor, p. 63.

[34]Images of Faith, p. 98.

[35]Christ and Apollo, pp. 93-4.

[36]"Laughter," in Comedy, p. 174.

[37]Ibid., pp. 180-81.

[38]The Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971), p. 34.

[39]Ibid., p. 42.

[40]Images of Faith, p. 126.

CHAPTER II

MOTHERS AND SURROGATE MOTHERS

The archetype with which each of O'Connor's female protagonists aligns herself is determined by the area of her life in which she is shown waging her struggle with reality. Although motherhood is an attribute of some of O'Connor's archetypal farm managers and may figure in their plots, these women find their greatest conflict elsewhere. A class of women exists, however, whose overriding concern lies in the role of mother. The predicament of the mother figure resides, as in the managerial Marthas, in her static univocality, with the contrarieties and imperceptions that arise from this intransigence.

O'Connor's mothers are never stereotyped in the maternal tradition of American popular culture. In a letter to Elizabeth and Robert Lowell dated 17 March 1953, O'Connor satirizes the fatuous celebration of mother. Referring to "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," she stated, "That is my contribution to Mother's Day throughout the land. I felt I ought to do something like Senator Pappy O'Daniels." She goes on to quote his "poem" expressing his love for his mother "whether she's live or dead . . . an angel or an old dope head."[1] Tom T. Shiftlet's burlesque of filial

devotion is but one example of O'Connor's satires against maudlin idealizations. Her rejection probably stemmed from the same reason she objected to pietistic language: she believed so strongly in the realities that sentimentality masks. And she was keenly conscious of maternal cares, as her stories and letters show.

As often noted, O'Connor's family units are nearly always incomplete, most often lacking a father figure. In some stories, however, the mother is absent, as in "The Lame Shall Enter First." Where the family is complete, as in "The River" or "A View of the Woods," some parental aberration is notable. The most extensive discussion of this aspect of O'Connor's fiction is found in Joan Tucker Brittain's "The Fictional Family of Flannery O'Connor."[2] O'Connor's mutilated family units serve to intensify the spiritual incompleteness of the characters, underscoring univocal rigidities unmodified by the complementary attitude of an equal partner.

Although the mother-figures share with the managerial Marthas faith in the work ethic and in their own energies, exhibiting the same rigidity that makes them both comic and terrible, there are a variety of maternal roles. First of all, three stories have a reversal of roles where the aged depend upon the

young. The daughter in "The Geranium" and "Judgement Day" acts as surrogate mother to her father. Sally Poker Sash of "A Late Encounter with the Enemy" is similarly a surrogate mother to her grandfather. A unique role in this class of archetypes is that of Ruby Hill whose story, "A Stroke of Good Fortune," reveals the reactions of a woman in learning of her pregnancy. Perhaps the most bizarre mother is Mrs. Lucynell Crater of "The Life You Save May Be Your Own." The remaining mothers in this class play more ordinary roles than the preceding do, in their ages and in their care for their disagreeable adult offspring.

Three stories have a reversal of roles. "A Late Encounter with the Enemy" has Sally Poker Sash as a surrogate mother to her grandfather. In "The Geranium" and in "Judgement Day," the daughter has assumed the mother role in caring for her father, displacing him from his Georgia farm to her New York apartment. In each of these stories, an understanding of the "father's" plight is integral to an appreciation of the surrogate mother.

"The Geranium," written for O'Connor's M. F. A. thesis, and "Judgement Day," her last story, begin and end the collection, The Complete Stories. In both stories the daughter plays surrogate mother to

her aged father who has left his Georgia home to live with her in New York--a decision he silently regrets. Although the old man is called Dudley in the first story and Tanner in the last, he is the same figure just as the daughter in both stories is the same. In the first story, she tries to cope with his lassitude and dissatisfaction by creating meaningless activity for him, a situation that escalates and climaxes with his death in the second story.

The daughter is another logical, practical woman who does her duty to the letter, but not to the spirit, congratulating herself on her superiority in caring for her father. She cannot understand his need for his Georgia home and friends--his dissatisfaction with the cramped quarters in contrast with his memories of hunting and fishing. She, on the other hand, is content in her fixed place. The old man's expansive nature causes the daughter anxiety. She fears his rural Georgia manners will antagonize the black neighbors, whom she prefers to ignore. Her anxieties are ultimately realized, though in a most unexpected way. The New York apartment and its environs become a literal and metaphorical labyrinth for the old man who cannot negotiate his way in the first story, foreshadowing his final entrapment in the second. His helplessness marks him as a soul doomed by urbanization,

a kind of hell that his daughter ironically sees as a salvation from Georgia.

Even though the father resents being in "no place," and his protective daughter chafes at his inability to "adapt" to New York, their relationship is more amicable than O'Connor's family groups usually are. They have, however, little in common to share--typical of O'Connor's parents and children. In "The Geranium," the gap is evident in the daughter's struggle to converse: "First she had to think of something to say. Usually it gave out before what she considered was the proper time to get up and do something else, so he would have to say something. He always tried to think of something he hadn't said before." Dudley's considerateness here contrasts with the mother-parent elsewhere who rattles on and on, oblivious to the irritation she arouses.

"Judgement Day," more complex than "The Geranium," contains multiple ironies deriving from conflicts engendered by race, compounded by conflicting urban and rural mores. The contradictory racial attitudes are as integral to this story as they are to "Everything That Rises Must Converge"; Tanner's story, however, develops a keener awareness of white dependence on blacks. His greatest diversion in New York is his memory of his black friend Coleman, whom he recalls

ironically as "a monkey on his back," not yet aware of his dependence upon the black, which is made clear in Coleman's "final plan." Tanner's complexities can only be appreciated in relation to his daughter's character. An enlightening, full discussion of Tanner is found in The Pruning Word.[3]

Although the daughter scolds her father, trying to correct his racial attitudes, she expresses a more alarming bigotry in ignoring her neighbor. She wants no "trouble," nor, as a matter of fact, anything at all to do with "them." In defending her father to her husband, however, she says it takes brains to "make a nigger work." Here the daughter exhibits a characteristic confusion, attributing success to logical proceeding (brains), never thinking of intuition. In fact, like most of the Martha-related characters, she notably lacks any intuition, unlike her father, who recalls the moment when he first met the then-recalcitrant Coleman, a belligerent loiterer. Guided by some "intruding intelligence," Tanner carves a pair of wooden spectacles to give the delighted black man. His first act is intuitive, but later the vision is reversed when Tanner comes to "see" the true relation between Coleman and himself.

Lacking intuition and the capacity for friendship that her father has, the daughter denies hell, calling

it "a lot of hardshell Baptist hooey." Tanner, on the contrary, had determined in his younger years not to go to hell for killing a black, showing a belief that, while non-altruistic, at least exemplifies the dictum that all faith begins with a fear of God. The daughter disclaims both faith and fear, but once her father is dead, she cannot sleep until she ships his body home to Georgia.

Although she cares nothing for her rural Georgia Baptist origins, a remnant of her Southern manners survives in the daughter's belief in the efficacy of pretense. When Tanner says his last kind words to her, she asks, "Now, don't saying something nice make you feel better?" Also typical of the O'Connor mother figures, the daughter believes in productive activity, sending the old man on fake errands. She perhaps carries what Lynch calls the faith in modern technology to the utmost when she advises her father to seek an "inspiration and out-let" in television, a means for him to "quit thinking about morbid stuff, death and hell and judgement." The irony is of course the morbidity of her existence that she considers "enlightened." A willing exile in bondage to modernity, the daughter nonetheless cannot rest until she fulfills her promise to ship Tanner's body home.

Just as Tanner's daughter is deluded by the "superiority" of her way of life, so is Sally Poker Sash, who cares for her one-hundred-and-four-year-old grandfather. "A Late Encounter with the Enemy" is a satire of the "moonlight and magnolias" tradition--with Sally Poker Sash, a sixty-two-year-old baccalaureate candidate, bitterly virulent against her contemporaries, glorying in an imaginary past. Her only joy in life is arranging for exhibitions of "General" Sash at various occasions. Her one prayer is that he live to be on stage at her graduation, and he is--for awhile. He dies during the ceremony and his corpse is wheeled to the Coca-Cola machine by an unheeding nephew.

A staunch daughter of the Confederacy, Sally Poker Sash complains often that nothing is normal anymore: a complaint inviting a definition of normality, reminiscent of the woman in "revelation" rejoicing in her own sanity. The chief complaint Sally Poker Sash has against the abnormal "upstarts" is a degree requirement to teach, forcing her into twenty summer sessions. Her revenge is that she never changes her teaching techniques. More importantly, she imagines that her grandfather's presence on stage at her graduation will show the "upstarts" what is "behind" her.

A dead fabrication is in fact behind her. Her grandfather, perhaps only a foot soldier in the Civil War, through the years and the hyperbole of Hollywood, has been escalated to general. Like a mummy on exhibit at various functions, he only occasionally shows any sign of life. Regardless, he dominates his granddaughter. In company, he squelches her comments, insistently directing attention to himself. Faintly remembering his grim wife, he prefers his fond recollections of Hollywood starlets and pretty girls of a movie premiere in Atlanta where he appeared briefly.

Sally Poker Sash's one virtue is her discomfort at the memory of the Atlanta premiere. Like a distraught mother, she forgets to change shoes for the occasion. The embarrassing recollection is offset by the memory of a gladiola made into the semblance of a rose, showing her relation to the women in "Revelation" in their admiration of whatever is artificial, a facet of failed vision.

Also like the other women, Sally Poker Sash tries to deny reality, preferring illusion. Just as Mrs. McIntyre and Mrs. May are closer to truth in their dreams than they are in their waking world, so does Sally Poker Sash witness a "vision" that denudes the romantic trappings she adorns her grandfather with.

A pun on seeing (understanding) comically presents the truth of all men as Sally screams in her sleep, "See him!" In his century-plus nakedness the old man sits in a wheelchair "with a terrible expression on his face." Analogous to this scene is one in Wise Blood where Enoch appears naked before his adoptive mother to insure his release from his foster home. In both scenes, illusions are literally stripped, showing the women's bondage to appearance and their inability to face the naked truth.

The naked truth for Sally Poker Sash and her fictional sisters in the O'Connor canon is of course that social status is a sham and that all humans share a commonality--though few ever realize it. General Sash is as artificial as the tinselly premiere; both devastate the Southern romantic tradition. Only at his death does the old man's hard head open up a bit to the real horrors of history. There is both comedy and terror in this final ironic touch. Whether his granddaughter will carry on the charade by romanticizing his death until she herself has "a late encounter with the enemy" is left to the reader to surmise.

In their roles as surrogate-mothers, Tanner's daughter and Sally Poker Sash are caught up in

contrasting attitudes toward the past. Like Tanner's daughter, Ruby Hill of "A Stroke of Good Fortune" deludes herself that she has found the good life in the city, away from her rural origins, with an "advanced" outlook on life. Her attitude also involves the maternal role, which she rejects because of its destruction of self. Although Sally Poker Sash is ludicrous in her cherishing of the past, both Tanner's daughter and Ruby Hill discover that, no matter how they deny mysterious forces from their backgrounds, ultimately they are forced into an affirmation. Ruby's discovery is the beginning of motherhood.

The story opens with her return to her apartment from a grocery store, annoyed by the greens she has bought for her visiting brother's dinner. The collards are to Ruby what the madeline is to Proust: they set memories in motion of her brother's birth, her mother's early aging. These memories merge with Ruby's pondering a fortune teller's prediction made earlier that day--that Ruby would soon enjoy "a stroke of good fortune." As Ruby laboriously ascends the stairs, she gradually reaches an understanding of the prediction: namely, that she is pregnant. Much of her reverie contrasts her mother's premature aging through child-birth with her own comparative youthfulness. Ruby

Hill's faith has been placed in the efficacy of birth control.

O'Connor wrote about the story to "A": "It is much too farcical to support anything." She did not, in fact, want it included in the collection A Good Man Is Hard to Find.[4] Although the story is not as complex as her great ones, the structure and imagery are admirable. Ruby Hill's struggle to ascend the stairs matches her inner struggle to accept her pregnancy.

Ruby is first described as a woman whose head resembles a turnip. Annoyed, she feels her brother Rufus should not want to eat collards. Like Haze Motes--whom he had been in very early drafts of the story--Rufus cannot go home because their hometown no longer exists; he has nonetheless a strong attachment to his origins, unlike Ruby, who ironically imagines she has "risen" from them as she struggles to climb the stairs. Again, female complacency is contrasted with a male sense of loss.

When she first stops to rest, she sits on "nine inches of treacherous tin," a joke on her faith in her husband's efforts to prevent conception, as well as an introduction to bothersome little Hartley Gilfeet, a neighbor child. Next, she pauses for a conversation with Mr. Jerger, a former teacher marked by a propensity for rhetorical questions. His question for that day

concerns Ponce de Leon. In the ensuing discussion, Mr. Jerger claims to have found the fountain of youth in his own heart, neatly tying together youth, birth, and heart--Ruby's conscious and unconscious thoughts.

At the third stop, her friend Laverne explicates Ruby's predicament by singing a sentimental popular refrain, "Put them all together, they spell M-O-T-H-E-R." "Them" are not the saintly attributes of the song, but Ruby's faintness, swollen feet, and protruding stomach. Angrily Ruby leaves with a scathing remark about Laverne's feet, her size nine phallic symbol, thus expressing her resentment of Laverne's intentions toward Rufus, the brother, that Ruby both resents and here tries to protect.

Ruby sits on the stairs, trying to renew her faith in the fortune teller, but her efforts are interrupted by the unexpected appearance of the appropriately named, mischevious Gilfeet boy whose "charging chipmunk face . . . crashes into her and rockets through her head." The sounds and actions of this scene are apocalyptic: jump, bang, rumble, rattle, shake, gallop, pierce, shake, streak, spring, grasp, fly, whirl, shoot--all end in "a whirl of dark." In the ensuing silence, Ruby gazes "down into the dark hold, down to the very bottom where she had started

up so long ago," and hollowly intones, "Good Fortune Baby." Three echoes "leer" back, and she feels a little roll inside herself "as if it were out nowhere, . . . resting and waiting with plenty of time." The three echoes parallel her three stops that lead to her awareness of procreation's arithmetic that one and one make three. The apocalyptic vision signals the end of her old life as the "whole" Ruby she had congratulated herself on being. Her reluctant acceptance of the fact that she is no longer just Ruby lies in her ironic salutation to the new life within, initiating her into the mystery of motherhood. Her former univocal view equating children with destruction of mother--and youth--slowly but painfully dissipates, we are led to assume, as her story ends.

Although the story is sometimes interpreted as a tract against birth control, it is certainly much more than that. Artfully done, it reconstructs Ruby's distorted view of life engendered by her childhood exposure to poverty and pain. Silly though she is in her vain delusions of escaping age and reluctant as she is to sacrifice her egocentricity, Ruby Hill nonetheless remains a valid emobdiment of the woman faced with the reality of surrendering a part of her autonomy. Motherhood holds its terrors for this character, comic though the revelation is.

Where Ruby Hill's head is metaphorically a vegetable, Mrs. Crater's is best described by her name. In "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," she avidly desires Tom Shiftlet as a husband for her idiot daughter, Lucynell. When the one-armed itinerant arrives, Mrs. Crater feels certain that she has the perfect lure, which she is not long in offering: "You'd be getting a permanent house and a deep well and the most innocent girl in the world." Shiftlet is enamored instead of an abandoned car on the place. The two engage in horse-trading tactics, with Shiftley eventually marrying the daughter and abandoning her on their "honeymoon" trip.

Mrs. Crater has the practicality of the Marthas, but manners and intelligence resembling Mrs. Shortley of "The Displaced Person" or the white-trash woman of "Revelation." When offered gum by Mr. Shiftlet, she rolls her upper lip back to show her lack of teeth. When he recalls that the monks of old slept in their coffins, she replies, "They wasn't as advanced as we are." In this isolated world where "the old woman's three mountains /ā r e/ black against the dark blue sky and /ā r e/ visited off and on by various planets and by the moon," one seems suspended in a pre-human

world of troglodytes and trolls, with the abandoned automobile an unnatural artifact ignored by the inhabitants until the arrival of Tom T. Shiftlet.

Mr. Shiftlet is a confidence man, as May states.[5] The daughter plays the "wise fool" in uttering "burrddttt," for bird is associated with the trickster in myth and legend; and Mr. Shiftlet is one bird who will fly when he can, having no intention of being the bird in hand. To draw attention away from his own design or as a means of catharsis, he rambles on about the rottenness of the world. Mrs. Crater, another logical woman, has practical plans in mind as Mr. Shiftlet rants on. "'Lady, there's some men that some things mean more to them than money.' The old woman rocked without comment. . . . . She wondered if a one-armed man could put a new roof on. . . . he asked a lot of questions that she didn't answer." Her silence undercuts his indignation at the world, furnishing much of the story's humor. When she does talk, in contrast with his duplicity, she is blunt: "Why don't you teach her to say 'Sugarpie'?" But as usual in O'Connor, the logical, practical woman is defeated in the battle of wits--and in all others.

The daughter Lucynell, a passive instrument, is one of those rare instances of a retardate's successful use as a comic character, possible because she is no

less funny than Mrs. Crater in her obsession and Mr. Shiftlet in his. Although Lucynell is pathetic in her abandoned state, she is lucky to be free from Mr. Shiftlet, who is not long in finding what he believes a captive audience--the hitchhiker who rebels instead.

Critics agree that the story is one of the most totally comic in the canon, yet Mrs. Crater is rather horribly eager to barter her daughter, a helpless, if willing, pawn. Mother-as-panderer is somewhat softened by her parting tears that "seep sideways out of her eyes and run along the dirty creases in her face." Objections are sometimes made to O'Connor's vision on the basis of the remarkable physical ugliness of her characters. Her purposeful use of the ugly shows, according to McFarland:

> O'Connor's conviction that her age suffered from a Manichaean sensibility that considers the body and the spirit to be incompatible and that tends to seek transcendence, or freedom, through an escape from the limitations and absurdities of the flesh. Much of O'Connor's fiction seems deliberately intended to affront this Manichaean sensibility by depicting the flesh in its more grotesque and repulsive forms and at the same time insisting that it is this flesh, not something etherealized and beautiful, in which the spirit dwells.[6]

Lynch also finds that unattractive man can be a means of knowing the human condition. In his discussion of comedy, he states that "the telescope of comedy reveals

the actual contours, the interstices, the smells, of the beastly man."[7] This statement ties to his assertion, cited earlier, about the significance of the ugly and unattractive in Father Zossima's death. Lynch therefore sees unattractive characters as a means of achieving an understanding of possibilities, his definition of faith.

"The Life You Save May Be Your Own" is based on the irony of characters physically and spiritually ugly. Lucynell the daughter, mentally not there, has a beauty counterpointing her mother's ugliness, both physically and in her effort to barter her daughter. Tom T. Shiftlet, the one-armed man, deceives for gain and recklessly tries to outrun the pursuing thunderstorm while hypocritically engaging in sentimental platitudes, another male spirit determinedly free, connivingly using and evading the female offer of a fixed place.

In leaving the primordial world of the Craters, we turn to mothers with identifiably realistic motherly qualities. This category of mothers is notably patient with insufferable offspring--though the mothers have their share of annoying characteristics. As noted earlier, O'Connor's family units are most often missing one parent. In addition, the remaining

parent and the child are often alienated from each other, with the child withdrawing into a self-imposed exile, fancying himself intellectually superior to those around him, most emphatically his parent. Robert Coles finds that O'Connor's "intellectual children" are a reflection of her own tendency toward intellectual pride."[8] His conclusion is probably correct, for she says that her own disposition is a mixture of Nelson's ("The Artificial Nigger") and Hulga's ("Good Country People").[9] Both characters think they know the answers, but find they do not.

Coles's conclusion that O'Connor identifies with the intellectual offspring agrees with Louise Westling's observation, but with a twist. She concludes that O'Connor's stories are a subliminal protest against woman's lot in the world, citing Sally Virginia, Joy/Hulga, and the child in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost."[10] Westling's interpretation overlooks the fact that the intellectual sisters have a number of brothers who exhibit the same intellectual aloofness characterizing the femine members of O'Connor's collective clan. The universal truth is that children commonly imagine themselves superior to their parents though they may be less effectual in fact--regardless of gender. Of course, the biographical fact of O'Connor's life with her widowed mother creates facile comparisons. But to take

that fact as a primary and only element is to simplify a complex writer. Rather, like James Joyce, an author she admired, O'Connor uses the metaphor of the alienated child.

Like Walter of "Why Do the Heathen Rage?" Julian of "Everything That Rises Must Converge," and Asbury of "The Enduring Chill," Thomas of "The Comforts of Home" is an intellectual, a stuffy historian smugly insulated against life's turmoils. His mother shares the maternal traits of Julian's mother, both toward her own child and in reaching out to another. Thomas's mother, however, is more radical in that she is genuinely concerned with suffering in the world. Taking the refractory Sarah Ham under her wing, the mother arouses the ire of her son. Inept, Thomas can only resort to underhanded tactics to rid himself of the intruder into his comfortable place. He plants a gun in the girl's purse. In the ensuing argument and struggle, the mother is inadvertently wounded mortally.

Although initially Thomas is not as alienated as the other intellectual sons are, being inextricably attached to his electric blanket--an umbilical symbol of the comforts of his mother's "saner virtues"--the invading Sarah causes his estrangement from his mother. Sarah Ham, a totally disagreeable delinquent, activates all the latent childishness in Thomas. Their story

is a tale of what can literally happen as a result of the metaphorical interchange of children occurring so often, through implication or threat, in O'Connor's stories.

Thomas's mother insists that Thomas could have been Sarah Ham, a univocal view of the sameness of all children. Thomas refuses to believe that. He also refuses to be bothered in the slightest by anyone's misfortune, least of all by that of a gum-chewing illiterate, prone to lying and drinking away her troubles. As usual in O'Connor, the two attitudes are at extreme odds.

Thomas's mother is atypical of O'Connor's women inasmuch as she has a vulnerable heart. Neither does she furnish much of the story's irony nor does she occasion any of its comedy. Perhaps closer to the maternal ideal than any of the other major characters, she confronts the reality of specific human suffering and participates in it. She is aware that her gifts of candy and Kleenex are inadequate compensations, and she is aware of Sarah Ham's ridicule. Knowing how inadequate her efforts are, she persists nevertheless.

In this story perhaps more than in any other, the reader is alienated from all the characters, having no one with whom to empathize. One is reminded of Bertrolt Brecht's desire to alienate the audience

in order that they may better assess a situation. O'Connor's stories often are more successful than Brecht's plays in achieving that purpose. The hard question here as elsewhere is this: How can one love the Sarah Hams of the world and other such neighbors?

Because Sarah Ham is so disagreeable that some readers wish Thomas success, critics have attacked his mother. Carter W. Martin, for example, states that Thomas's mother "mouths self-righteous platitudes."[11] If she were self-righteous, she would expect gratitude from Sarah Ham or congratulate herself--she does neither. Thomas, on the other hand, self-righteously complains. The old lady with whom Sarah lives before her eviction indignantly proclaims the respectability of her house. But Thomas's mother states only that the girl needs help.

Neither is Kathleen Feeley sympathetic with what she calls the "sticky sentimentality" of the character.[12] Thomas's mother is not a sentimental character because she neither denies reality nor romanticizes it. Knowing that Sarah Ham ridicules her, the mother expresses no belief that she will fundamentally change the girl; her greatest hope seems to be to keep the girl free from a jail or a hospital. Unlike Sheppard of "The Lame Shall Enter First," the mother does not sin through the pride of saving another. She simply

expresses the truth, "You don't know what you'd do in a pinch," words that are "clearly prophetic"--and not just for Thomas.[13]

Eggenschwiler, in comparing Thomas's mother with Father Flynn, correctly observes that the mother is "a woman of the highest natural virtue."[14] Eggenschwiler's interpretation agreed with O'Connor's: "The old lady is the character whose position is right. . . . She brings Thomas face to face with his own evil--which is that of putting his own comfort before charity (however foolish)."[15]

Although in most stories the woman or the mother insists on reason and logic, here it is the son who persists in reason, seeing even virtue "as the principle of order," which makes Thomas a non-Christian, latter-day pagan. He wants to maintain his prelapsarian existence against the intruder who is too blatant and annoying to be even a temptation to forsake it. Even though evey literal indication in the story points to Thomas's revulsion against Sarah, such as his speeding her away and practically ejecting her from the car, some readers insist on the sexual symbolism in the story. He does put his gun in Sarah's purse and does--effectively--kill his mother, his Oedipal attachment. With or without such a reading, however, Thomas bungles everything. More than his ineptitude,

though, it is his smugness and rationalism that invite a disastrous revelation of his error in assuming that life is the way he sees it, in denying the truth of mystery.

Thomas's assessment of Sarah Ham as having no "responsible faculty," being a "moral moron," is borne out in her description and in her actions. Dorothy Walters finds that this grave deficiency in Sarah Ham seems to destroy the absolutism of moral vision in the O'Connor canon:

> If we now accept Thomas's assessment of this social misfit, we are confronted by a moral universe suddenly grown vastly more complex. This . . . compromise with modernist positions would seem to deny the absolutism of O'Connor's moral vision elsewhere. . . . However, such a seemingly abrupt reversal of moral perspective on the author's part is probably deceptive. More likely, her rejection of the various characters and their misguided actions stem from their own separation from Christian concern. . . . No religious commitment controls /the mother's/ actions.[16]

Contrary to Walters' findings, O'Connor often voices concern over the significant number of people who lack any moral sense, as previously cited. Moreover, in a letter to John Hawkes, while discussing "The Comforts of Home," she expressed an interest "in this sort of innocent person /Sarah Ham/ who sets the havoc in motion."[17] From such remarks, we can conclude

that O'Connor's absolute vision is not so narrow as often supposed--after all, the Catholic Church does make a distinction between vincible and invincible ignorance. Sarah Ham, then, is a catalyst for Thomas and his mother, enabling them to face the reality of Thomas's selfishness. And, as O'Connor noted in writing to Hawkes, the greatest irony of the story is Thomas's destruction of "the one person his comfort depended on."[18] Thomas goes beyond his namesake of Thomas the Doubter, for he changes from a rationalistic explainer of virtue in moderation to one who damns "not only the girl but the entire order of the universe that made her possible," a zenith of rebellious pride. Unlike her son, the mother accepts whatever is, trying only to alleviate misery, however ineffectively. O'Connor expressed dissatisfaction with the story, stating in her typically purposeful ungrammatical fashion that it "has a very interesting devil in it," though "the story itself don't come off."[19] Actually the story has merit, though it lacks the richness of the other stories where the mother-figure embodies the comedy and horror of life.

Mrs. Fox of "The Enduring Chill," unlike Thomas's mother, takes a logical view of life--more typical of

O'Connor femininity. Her son, Asbury, resembles Thomas, however, in his comical pomposity. Asbury, masochistically engaged in his struggle to remain dedicated to art despite his lack of talent, is forced to leave New York and return to his rural Georgia home because of ill health. He is convinced of his impending death, though his illness is finally diagnosed as nothing more serious than undulant fever--"Bang's in a cow." His mother tries every way known to her to divert her invalid son's attention and make his convalescence pleasant. Both a boor and a bore, Asbury remains wrapped in his own misery, blaming his mother for his deficiencies. Ultimately he realizes the truth about himself as assessed by Father Finn: "a lazy ignorant conceited youth."

Asbury is a satirical portrait of a young man who would like to be an artist, who in infantile fashion blames his mother for his lack of talent, complaining that "her way had simply been the air he breathed" in an inversion of Gerard Manley Hopkins' "world-mothering air / Nestling me everywhere" ("The Blessed Virgin Compared to the Air We Breathe"). Despite his unconscious sublimity here, Asbury is a comical romantic. Like Tom Sawyer, he envisions his own funeral; his letter to his mother to be opened posthumously is juvenile and vengeful.

In contrast with Asbury, Mrs. Fox is an agreeable philistine. Since she is not conversant with Asbury's interests, she talks of what she can, of "cows with names like Daisy and Bessie Button and their intimate functions," irritating Asbury beyond measure. Ironically, had he ever listened, he might have learned the danger of unpasteurized milk. In addition to her lack of intellectual depth, Mrs. Fox has many of the characteristics of the managerial Marthas, but with softened edges. For example, she believes in her own energy and power, asking if Asbury thinks she is just going to sit there and let him die--as if she could stop it. The bodily needs, moreover, are the real ones to Mrs. Fox: "I thought it was just a nervous breakdown, but now I think it's something real." Believing in the efficacy of physical work, she recommends work in the dairy as a cure for her son. She thinks Asbury's intellectualism is his trouble, not realizing that he is a poseur. Despite Mrs. Fox's provincialism, she speaks the truth in stating that "when people think they are smart--even when they are smart--there is nothing anybody else can say to make them see things straight."

Mrs. Fox, like Julian's mother in "Everything That Rises Must Converge," is reminiscent of the biblical Salome, mother of James and John, an assertive mother with regard to the welfare of her sons. Dedicated

to the well-being of her son, Mrs. Fox suggests he write a novel. Knowing that he craves conversation with an "intellectual," she discards her first thought of his sister, Mary George, an elementary school principal, the only "intellectual" Mrs. Fox knows.

Mary George herself is an interesting minor female character, an amalgam of Mary Grace, Joy/Hulga, and an older Sally Virginia, being very much her own person. She has a formidable tongue and no illusions about her brother, recommending shock treatments for him and predicting that "all he's going to be around here for the next fifty years is a decoration." He will not talk to his sister nor she to him.

Asbury sneers at Mrs. Fox's suggestion of a visit from the Methodist minister with an interesting coin collection, insisting instead on a Jesuit because he once met one who struck his romantic fancy. The Jesuit who does appear, Father Finn, is the exact opposite of Asbury's recollection of the savant Jesuit in New York. Mrs. Fox, of course, disapproves Asbury's request for a visit from the black workers--unable to comprehend his reasons any more than she can comprehend why he ever wrote a play about them--unsuccessful, of course. While Mrs. Fox exhibits the racial prejudice of her time and place, she does know--

more than Asbury--that the two workers are capable people. He is unable to communicate with the blacks because he looks at them as exotic creatures, and they look at him as someone whose mother "ain't whup him enough when he was little."

On the farm Asbury is alienated in his self-deception, pitted against the various practical viewpoints of his mother, his sister, Father Finn, and Doctor Block (who admits he does not know much), and even against the blacks' primitive logic. The ensuing incongruities create the comedy of the story. What horror there is--Asbury's determination to wound his mother--dissipates with Asbury's recognition of the truth about his foolish pride and self-deception. Nevertheless, the truth of inherent pain in family relationships remains.

Julian's mother in "Everything That Rises Must Converge" has much in common with Mrs. Fox. Both have sons who blame their mothers for their own failures as artists, indulging in childish, self-pitying, vengeful fantasies; both sons find racial barriers <u>declassé</u>, yet neither is able to treat blacks as normal human beings. Their two stories dramatize the hostility of the dependent adult child toward the supportive mother, who remains tolerant of her antagonistic child. "Every-

thing That Rises Must Converge" is the story of a bus trip to the "Y" for an overweight mother reluctantly accompanied by her son, Julian, because of her fear of riding the newly integrated buses. She offers a penny to a black child and is clouted by his irate mother. The shock gives Julian's mother a fatal attack.

The story is one of Julian's plunge ever more deeply into guilt. At the beginning we learn that he does not "like to consider all she did for him." He is, moreover, exasperated at her endless discussion of whether she should have bought a hideous purple hat, which proves to be the story's objective correlative for basic human equality. During the development of the story, his guilt takes the form of rebellion as he retreats into his "mental bubble" to escape his mother's conversation with any and all.

Here as in so many cases cited, the offspring is frustrated by the parent's conversation. Julian reflects that his mother "rolled onto /the racial topic/ every few days like a train on an open track. He knew every stop, every junction, every swamp along the way, and knew the exact point at which her conclusion would roll majestically into the station." The most dramatic and obvious conflict between the two is their difference on the racial topic: each has romanticized the subject, though in opposite directions. The mother belongs to

the "moonlight and magnolias" tradition, glamorizing--probably also distorting--her childhood on the decaying plantation. Such a life is preferable to the ugliness of their current neighborhood, and Julian envies her the experience of the genteel tradition, thinking he could have appreciated it more. The old plantation had been, however, his mother's home, and her final reference to that life by calling for Caroline, the black maid, suggests the sense in which her own life has been an exile. Julian's mother is unique in her experience of displacement and homecoming: in O'Connor's canon, this is typically a masculine characteristic.

Her banalities, though, are distinctively female. The woman on the bus with whom she converses is the white-trash woman of "Revelation" moved to the city.[20] She and Julian's mother engage in a comic conversation about selling typewriters (Julian's occupation) as being one step to being a writer, comforting themselves with clichés, revealing a terrible lack of comprehension, harmless though it is. More dangerous is the mother's unreasonable fear of the middle-class black man sitting nearby. When blacks sat in the back, she had not been afraid. Nor does she fear what she should--her own patronizing attitude, as well as the formidable black mother. The attitude of Julian's mother is characteristic of the manners of her age in accepting the

harmlessness of black women, while fearing the male.

Julian's mother also exhibits the imaginary superiority typical of the Marthas and most of the mothers, justifying her hat by saying, "You won't meet yourself coming and going." Her attitude toward other women at the "Y" is that they "are not our kind of people." Most central, however, is the dictum of the old Southern moderate: that blacks should "rise on their side of the fence." When she meets face to face her black doppelganger wearing the identical hat, however, she accepts the fact with dignity that she has met herself, going at least.

Even though Julian's mother's banalities are irritating, hers are preferable to her son's. Julian's refutation of her mother's dated views on race at least appears sound. Like Asbury, however, he can establish no significant relationship with a black. This is symbolized by his attempt to converse with the middle-aged black man, built on the sham of asking for a match when he does not smoke and in a place where smoking is prohibited. His motivation lies, moreover, in provoking his mother. In addition, his seething fantasies of abandoning his mother reveal an adolescent mind resentful of having received kindness from the dowdy lady of little intelligence.

The bus and its occupants are a microcosm of the

comedy of manners of a newly integrated South--with its attendant terrors. The horizontal forward motion of the bus is in ironic juxtaposition to the story's title, which points rather to the tense relationships on the bus. The distinterested black man is an object of fear to the white women. Julian, representative of "intelligence," is ineffectual outside of his mental bubble; inside, he is ridiculously petty. The black woman, mirror image of Julian's mother, univocally views all whites as enemies, just as Julian's mother rigidly opposes true racial equality. Carver, the black child, is the innocent catalyst for the violence ensuing from yet another metaphorical exchange of children. Julian's mother ignores the black woman's warning to Carver that she will "knock the livin' Jesus" out of him. The bus thrusts forward passengers who have long since reached their own hells--and Julian's mother is reduced by death's common denominator before she ever arrives at her class.

"Everything That Rises Must Converge," like "Greenleaf," dramatizes the terror and the comedy of the South in the throes of change, centering on a latter-day Civil War within and between two-member families; once again the issue is racial. If Julian's mother is the only casualty, her death has at least initiated Julian into adulthood where he will recon-

struct his life through "guilt and sorrow."

Although Flannery O'Connor has created some memorable mothers, perhaps none is more vivid than Bailey's mother, the grandmother of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." While she exhibits some characteristics in common with the mothers, her conversation is invariably more entertaining, and she takes a pleasure in life that is not characteristic of either the Marthas or the mothers. The occasion of the story once again is a journey, a family vacation to be precise, yet a hellish experience for the grandmother who must sit between two struggling children, largely ignored by her son and his wife, hiding her cat. Despite the awkwardness of the grandmother's position, her buoyant spirits contrast sharply with Bailey's stolidly heavy demeanor. One of the few complete family units in the O'Connor canon, this group contains someone "extra," an eventuality philosophized about by several O'Connor characters and notably here by The Misfit.

The framework of the family vacation, itself typically inherent with both comedy and terror, provides the occasion for the family's annihilation. The grandmother incites the children to plead for a detour to see an old home from her youth, requiring a trip down a deserted dirt road. As she realizes they are on

the wrong road, the cat frees itself, springing on Bailey, who consequently drives the car into the ditch. Deprived of their mobility, they are visited by The Misfit and his companions.

The grandmother had earlier warned against a trip to Florida because of The Misfit's escape from the penitentiary there, a justification for going to Tennessee where she wanted to go. Because of her interest in the newspaper story, she recognizes the escaped convict, even voicing her recognition. As a result, The Misfit has his companions shoot the younger members of the family until only the grandmother is left. When she reaches out to touch The Misfit in a gesture of acknowledgment that he is "one of /her7 own children," he shoots her too.

Her inadvertent mischief-making aside, the grandmother is a loveable figure--unique in the O'Connor canon. She shows her kinship with O'Connor femininity, however, in denying unpleasantness or by averting reality through the use of clichés, much as Mrs. Cope does. Her granddaughter, June Star, is, to use a Southern idiom, a sassy child whose observations counterpoint the grandmother's romanticism. June Star knows that the grandmother would not miss the trip to be "Queen for a day." When the grandmother points out a "cute little pickaninny," June Star notices he has no britches on. All of June

Star's smartness elicits the grandmother's recollection of a golden age when "children were more respectful of their native states and their parents and everything else."

The grandmother dresses carefully so that in the event of an accident, people will know she is a lady, apparently never having closely observed a victim of an accident. In contrast, the daughter-in-law dresses in slacks, with a kerchief round her head that makes her look like a cabbage. The grandmother's "navy blue straw sailor hat," a part of her thoughtful attire, disintegrates after the accident. When Bailey and his son are "asked" to step into the woods with The Misfit's companions, the hat brim comes off in the grandmother's hand. "She stood staring at it and after a second she let it fall to the ground." The hat becomes an objective correlative for her dawning realization of the meaninglessness of her values.

On their way to rendezvous with The Misfit, the family stops for lunch at Red Sammy Butts' place, The Tower. The scene exemplifies the absurdity of life without genuine faith, a faith that embraces human solidarity. First, the name "The Tower" is illogical--and hence ironic--because the restaurant is a long, dark room, reminiscent of a grave. Red Sammy's wife engages in the Southern charade of politeness with

June Star, who replies in her matter-of-fact way. The grandmother and Red Sammy agree that a good man is hard to find, with the grandmother averring that Europe is to blame. Red Sammy, his wife, and his monkey are unattractive creatures, though their association with heaven is established through their being in The Tower. The travellers round out the microcosm of the absurd: Bailey, whom trips make nervous; June Star and her grandmother in their unwitting danse macabre; Bailey's wife, a non-entity.

"A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is one of O'Connor's finest stories, yet one most subject to controversy. She objected to Andrew Lytle's calling the grandmother a witch. (He, ironically, had taught O'Connor.) O'Connor wrote to John Hawkes:

> It's interesting to me that your students naturally work their way to the idea that the Grandmother in 'A Good Man' is not pure evil and may be a medium for Grace. If they were Southern students I would say this was because they all had grandmothers like her at home. These old ladies exactly reflect the banalities of the society and the effect is of the comical rather than the seriously evil. But Andrew Lytle insists that she is a witch, even down to the cat. These children . . . know their grandmothers aren't witches.[21]

O'Connor elsewhere related other misconceptions of her intentions, telling of Jesse Stuart's asking if she were aware that the audience identifies with the grand-

mother, suggesting that the story be prolonged until the arrival of the police![22]

One cannot imagine the story any way other than O'Connor's way. In the crucial scene with The Misfit, the grandmother cries:

> "'Jesus, Jesus,' meaning, Jesus will help you, but the way she was saying it, it sounded as if she might be cursing . . . 'Jesus! You've got good blood! I know you wouldn't shoot a lady! I know you come from nice people! Pray! Jesus, you ought not to shoot a lady. I'll give you all the money I've got!'"

She desperately tries to exploit The Misfit's points of pride. His manners are impeccably those of a good country boy in the way he phrases his "requests"; therefore, the grandmother thinks he has a code of conduct toward ladies. She further appeals to his parentage since he has declared that "God never made a finer woman than my mother and my daddy's heart was pure gold." The grandmother ignores the fact that The Misfit has disagreed with her on the point of his being "a good man," flatly declaring that he is not.

The grandmother, however, has previously ignored the bare behind of the "pickaninny" and the loutishness of Red Sammy. She persists. Never having known what Jesus saves from, she finds her predicament a suitable one for salvation, though she still believes more in the

efficacy of manners and money than in Jesus. However, when she sees the "man's face twisted close to her own as if he were going to cry," she has a moment of recognition and murmurs, "Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!" Another of those symbolic interchanges of children reveals the idea of a "good man" as one who accepts the solidarity of the human race. Carter W. Martin observes: "The distance the grandmother travelled after the speedometer registered 55890 is the distance from her vacuous comment, 'look at the cute little pickaninny' to her amazed realization of the bonds of humanity--'Why, you're one of my babies.'"[23]

The story does cause some discomfort to those readers who feel they should not laugh at the deaths of comparative innocents. O'Connor herself refers to a "shift in tension," saying that the conventions of the story are "comic even though its meaning is serious."[24] Martha Stephens refers to a "tonal shift" as cited earlier, even questioning O'Connor's art. The best refutation of such critical objections is found in May's The Pruning Word. He points out that the imagery of the graveyard and of the grandmother's recollection of the house of her youth at Toombsboro (an actual place) and other details, adequately prepares the reader for a bizarre journey, to put it

mildly.

Another telling observation, made by Richard Pearce, applies specifically to this story and generally to others presenting difficulty to readers: "The grandmother and the reader fight against accepting raw reality; the grandmother . . . has developed a language of clichés to disguise and control reality much the same way that the reader has developed a set of literary responses."[25] The cliché as explanation, as defense, we see used by most of the women who are protagonists or who have strong supporting roles. And if we accept Lynch's dictum that faith is the only effective means of controlling reality--as opposed to denying or distorting it--then of course the error of the ladies' ways is fundamental.

Flannery O'Connor's mothers share certain well-documented characteristics, such as their urge to utter banalities, arising from a univocal view of life, and their misplaced faith in their own tenets. None has the comfort of sympathetic or even likeable children, because the latter have their separate, erroneous realities. In the case of the surrogate mothers like Tanner's daughter and Sally Poker Sash, a gap also exists between them and their elders. Whether child or elder, the dependent contrives his own means of escape from irritating conversation, each in exile from

the parental figure. Comedy and terror have been inherent in the familial setting from time immemorial, and O'Connor's stories realize the full potential of both the humor and the tragedy.

NOTES

CHAPTER II

[1]The Habit of Being, p. 57.

[2]Renascence 19 (Fall, 1966), 48-52.

[3]May, pp. 120-24.

[4]6 September 1955, in The Habit of Being, pp. 100-01.

[5]The Pruning Word, p. 67.

[6]Flannery O'Connor, pp. 25-6.

[7]Christ and Apollo, p. 95.

[8]"Flannery O'Connor: A Southern Intellectual," Southern Review, 16, No. 1 (Winter, 1980), 46-64.

[9]"To 'A'," 6 September 1955, in The Habit of Being, p. 101.

[10]"Flannery O'Connor's Mothers and Daughters," pp. 510-12.

[11]The True Country: Themes in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor (Vanderbilt Univ. Press, 1969), p. 38.

[12]Flannery O'Connor: Voice of the Peacock, p. 32.

[13]The Pruning Word, p. 108.

[14]The Christian Humanism of Flannery O'Connor, p. 83.

[15]"To John Hawkes," 3 March 1961, in The Habit of Being, p. 434.

[16]Flannery O'Connor (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1973), p. 145.

[17]3 March 1961, in The Habit of Being, p. 434.

[18]Ibid.

[19]"To John Hawkes," 6 November 1960, in The Habit of Being, p. 416.

[20]In a letter dated 20 November 1959, O'Connor wrote to John Hawkes that all the inhabitants of the country he described as "pure whiskey and Bible and coffins" have moved to the city. In The Habit of Being, p. 359.

[21]14 April 1960, in The Habit of Being, p. 389.

[22]"To Cecil Dawkins," 21 May 1959, in The Habit of Being, pp. 333-34.

[23]The True Country, p. 73.

[24]"To a Professor of English," 28 March 1961, in The Habit of Being, p. 437. In this letter O'Connor blasts "the interpretation of ninety students and three teachers" of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" as "about as far from /her/ intentions" as possible. She concludes with the advice that "too much interpretation is certainly worse than too little, and where feeling for a story is absent, theory will not supply it."

[25]Stages of the Clown: Perspectives on Modern Fiction from Dostoyevsky to Beckett (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1970), p. 70.

CHAPTER III

THE O'CONNOR WOMAN IN LOVE AND MARRIAGE

With occasional exceptions, such as Ruby Turpin's fondness of her husband and Mrs. McIntyre's thoughts of the late Judge, the Marthas and mothers in the canon neither regard men as erotic beings nor are they themselves so considered. The women's interests lie in profits, in the order they unsuccessfully try to impose on everyone, least successfully on their children. Four of the stories, however, specifically treat the man/woman relationship: "The Crop," "The Partridge Festival," "Parker's Back," and "Good Country People." In addition, several characters in Wise Blood dramatize various aspects of that relationship. In all cases, both the men and women labor confidently under the common errors of perception. They usually have diametrically opposed understandings of reality--persons, ideas, and events--and are sometimes aware of the sharp opposition, especially in the three stories where the women--seductresses of sorts--are intellectuals. In the case of Hulga in "Good Country People," for example, it is clear that both her mind and her body are ironically the reverse objects of the seduction she has planned.

Because O'Connor emphasizes the comedy and the horror arising from the basic attraction between the

sexes, some critics object to her treatment of Aphrodite's spell. For example, Miles Orvell opines that O'Connor's stories betray a "nervousness" about sex.[1] On the contrary, she may be satirizing those who display such seriousness--or those who insist on the efficacy of sexual intercourse devoid of sacramental value. At any rate, her characters engaged in courtship or in love are always essentially ludicrous. Although we laugh at the spectacle, we must consider seriously the mystery of Parker's attraction to Sarah Ruth and the depth of Hulga's determination to debauch the salesman's soul--particular instances of general human experiences--recalling again Lynch's dictum that comedy, the most concrete of the genres, gives insight.

The seductresses found in "The Crop," "The Partridge Festival," and "Good Country People" are intellectuals akin to Walter, Julian, and Thomas, among others, in stories previously discussed. Miss Willerton of "The Crop" fantasizes a romantic relationship, while Hulga of "Good Country People" makes a conscious decision to use her pudgy, maimed body to seduce a bible salesman. Like their fictional brothers, the women are unable to control the situation they set up; their intellects and theories are dreadfully inadequate in the face of reality--just as social stratification fails the older women. Mary Elizabeth's

story, "The Partridge Festival," is a happier one, for she and the young Calhoun realize their error of pretension and face their true kinship with the lunatic murderer, who has ruined the annual "rites of the azalea" in Partridge. Unaware of their own irony, Miss Willerton, Mary Elizabeth, and Hulga all typify in comic fashion the intellectual cut off from human solidarity. The intellectual women exemplify Lynch's observation that some moderns are not sufficiently ironic; that though they may view previously held beliefs with irony, they are unaware of their "own rhetoric and hollowness," resulting in another set of clichés.[2]

Miss Willerton, or Willie, of "The Crop" has a shallow romantic notion of art, which she reduces to sound without substance. Her comedy is a blend of parody and diminution. Inept at "crumbling the table," she disdains any practical knowledge such as the difference between hens' and pullets' eggs. An aspiring writer (like Julian and Asbury), she searches for exotic subjects and believes firmly in the importance of sounds for literary effect. "The ear," she maintains, "/ĭs/ as much a reader as the eye." Deciding to write about sharecroppers, she is convinced she can "capitalize on the hookworm." But, unable to maintain aesthetic distance from her material, she falls

in love with the poor farmer she creates, kills his slovenly wife, replaces her, and becomes the heroic, perfect wife. Her daydream of participating in a frontier epic of love and struggle is shattered by a request to run a mundane errand.

Miss Willerton is a timid soul who likes to plan passionate scenes but dreads family reactions to her writing. She not only fails to assert herself in the family, even in a small matter of book ownership, but also--and more significantly--is unable to face reality. While going to the grocery, she meets a real-life prototype of her fictional sharecropper, Lot, and turns to salt, deciding to write on the romantic Irish, never realizing that art lies in capturing and shaping physical realities that are often repelling. Miss Willerton is an inept writer as well as an inept person.

Although this trompe-l'oeil is something of a self-satire, it is perhaps aimed more at those students of writing whom O'Connor found tiresome. Her repeated assertions of the necessity of the concrete agree with Lynch's thesis that transcendence is achieved only by moving through reality. He states that the artist "demands that we see reality and all the modes in which it differs from fantasy and unreality," all of which is lacking completely in Miss Willerton's efforts.[3]

Not only is Miss Willerton satirized in her

failure to face reality in life and in art, but also popular reading tastes are ridiculed inasmuch as her story is a reductio ad absurdum of narrative formulas dealing with poor people's successful struggles and true love in the face of adversity. For example, once Willie rescues Lot from his vicious wife and feeds him, the two sit "for a long time thinking of how well they /understand/ each other." There is nothing to understand, and the exaggerated duration undercuts popular faith in the "understanding" of man and woman. Miss Willerton, both as creator and participant, symbolizes the escapist who finds vicarious experience enjoyable and reality unbearable. A twentieth-century Elaine, Miss W[illerton] is shattered not by forsaking her ridiculous notion of art, but by a glimpse of the real /Lance/ Lot.

Mary Elizabeth of "The Partridge Festival" is likewise an aspiring writer, though she scorns fiction. She also scorns Calhoun, another would-be writer. Both are visiting Partridge during the annual azalea festival. They deplore the prostitution of beauty and the greed of the local merchants, while sympathizing with the outcast Singleton. Singleton is a stingy misfit who has revenged his co-imprisonment with a goat--for not buying an azalea badge--by shooting five officials and one innocent bystander. Both Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth

exemplify the popular liberal stance of siding with the underdog and denigrating the "solid citizens," examples of Lynch's estimate of those who take their own rhetoric too seriously.

Although Mary Elizabeth sees the provincialism of Calhoun's great-aunts, "box-jawed old ladies," and mimics their calling Calhoun "Baby Lamb," she fails to recognize her own superficiality in automatically classifying Singleton as a Christ-figure, "metaphorically of course." Like all the univocally minded women, she is an object of humor in her lack of humor, crying over Singleton's fate, finding nothing humorous in the clandestine game that she and Calhoun concoct to gain entrance to the asylum to visit Singleton. In common with Mary George, Mary Grace, and Hulga, Mary Elizabeth scowls often and sometimes smirks. She fancies herself superior to beauty pageants and to everyone in Partridge, Calhoun included.

Calhoun is also convinced of his superiority to the hometown folks. He fails to understand or to believe anything told him about Singleton, insisting instead on his romanticized version of the man. Calhoun, in fact, has a romanticized vision of himself. He refuses to see his resemblance to his grandfather, a successful merchant. Even though he has proved a good salesman, he is ashamed of it and pursues a career

as a writer. He finds his aging aunts impossible to talk to, with their constant concern for resemblances, their support for the festival, and their advice to him about girlfriends.

The revelation of their own foolish intellectual posing comes to Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth through the spectacle of the insane lechery of Singleton. The "Christ-figure" boasts of his money in his attempt to seduce the girl, giving the truth of the townspeople's observations, showing the appropriateness of the goat as Singleton's fellow prisoner. Mary Elizabeth is exposed to the naked truth in the same literal way that Enoch's adoptive mother and Sally Poker Sash are. Mary Elizabeth, however, comes to accept the stripping away of her illusions and subsequent confrontation with reality.

Although Mary Elizabeth and Calhoun feel the antipathy usual to meetings arranged by relatives, each provokes the other into the journey that ultimately reveals the truth about themselves. Mary Elizabeth offers the challenge to visit the asylum, which Calhoun feels obliged to accept. Both are nervous and apprehensive on the morning of the visit. On the way, Mary Elizabeth's tears of misplaced compassion are matched by the rain. Once there, she recovers and again assumes command, securing fictitious passes

bearing the surname Singleton. Their establishment of a common bond with their fellow man is at this time a prevarication; later they will realize their true kinship, entering into the communion of humanity, an approbation in the O'Connor canon. On their return, Calhoun sees his true likeness to his grandfather reflected in Mary Elizabeth's glasses. Earlier he had denied any similarity, even after catching a distorted image of himself in the barbershop mirror. Thus, Mary Elizabeth, for all her dominance. serves as the medium for Calhoun's learning the truth of himself even as she recgonizes her own pretensions. Their story is the only one in the canon where a man and a woman together reach a state of enlightenment based on genuine self-knowledge and mutual regard, recognizing the lunacy of Partridge and Singleton as well as their own.

Each character in the story has his own particular insanity, both humorous and horrifying. O'Connor calls Singleton "another comic instance of the diabolical."[4] Calhoun tries to deny his own reality, and Mary Elizabeth imposes her own view on the small universe, typical of O'Connor's women. Even the little girl in the courthouse square is contradictory, calling Singleton a bad man while declaring her intention to

shoot anyone who hurts her. The mirror motif in the story gives a series of distorted images reminiscent of those in amusement arcades, and the absurdity of the characters is highlighted by the irrationality of the festival spirit. The determination of the profit-minded townspeople, juxtaposed to the rather vacuous idealism of the young couple, leaves Calhoun with an unsettled feeling until his world becomes stabilized by the reflected image of his grandfather in the subdued Mary Elizabeth's glasses.

Mary Elizabeth, in her intellectual snobbery, is a cousin to Joy/Hulga of "Good Country People." Hulga, however, more vividly portrays the comedy and horror of the intellectual female. Part of the comedy and background derive from Hulga's Martha-figure mother. Mrs. Hopewell, and her confidante, the dark Mrs. Pritchard. This pair, akin to the figures discussed in Chapter I, are here subordinated to the protagonist, Hulga, whose story, structured around her mother's clichéd faith in good country people and her own literal and metaphorical heart condition, climaxes in her abandonment without a leg to stand on--both literally and metaphorically.

In a typical O'Connor situation, Hulga lives with a mother who talks too much about too little. Into her tedious existence comes a bible salesman,

the salt of the earth, Manley Pointer, obviously a confidence-man. Hulga naively assumes he is what he appears to be and plans to seduce him. Instead she is tricked into surrendering her wooden leg, which he departs with, leaving her in the hayloft to ponder, we assume, her true nature.

Mrs. Hopewell is a perfect blend of both Martha and mother. As mother, she deplores her daughter's intellectualism, blaming Hulga's eccentricity on the Ph.D., thinking that philosophy "went out with the Greeks and Romans." Like Mary Grace's mother in "Revelation," Mrs. Hopewell advocates smiling as a means of making ugly people attractive, a notion that Hulga abhors. Most distasteful to Mrs. Hopewell is Hulga's discarding her given name, Joy, in favor of one that even sounds like ugly. Mrs. Hopewell is one of those resourceful O'Connor managers who has "no bad qualities of her own," but who is "able to use other people's in such a constructive way that she never /feels/ the lack." Therein lies her tolerance of Mrs. Freeman, the sharecropper's wife--a good country person, according to Mrs. Hopewell, yet from the perspective of O'Connor's canon, an ideal earthy counterpart to the managerial Martha.

Considerable irony derives from this description because Mrs. Freeman is not particularly "good." For

example, another employer had declared his aversion to her nosiness. Sister to Mrs. Pritchard in "A Circle in the Fire," she has "a special fondness for the details of secret infections, hidden deformities, assaults upon children." She is even more fascinated with Hulga's wooden leg than with her own daughters' sties and illnesses that she reports on daily. Her chthonic affinities are confirmed in the final scene as she turns her "attention to the evil-smelling onion shoot she /ĭs/ lifting from the ground." Mrs. Freeman and Mrs. Hopewell never exchange qualities as noted in the pairing of Mrs. Cope and Mrs. Pritchard, though the characteristics of their respective classes are obviously present.

Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman engage in endless clichés in the familiar pattern--for the purpose, no doubt, of setting the tone for Hulga's rebellion. She is suspended in a limbo of inanity, subject to the monotonous tedium of the older women's conversations:

> "Everybody is different," Mrs. Hopewell said.
> "Yes, most people is," Mrs. Freeman said.
> "It takes all kinds to make the world."
> "I always said it did myself."
> The girl was used to this kind of dialogue for breakfast and more of it for dinner; sometimes they had it for supper too.

The reader is inclined to sympathize with Hulga, to a certain extent, understanding her need to change the

routine, even with the yellow-socked salesman.

Mrs. Hopewell thinks that every year Hulga becomes "less like others and more like herself--bloated, rude, and squint-eyed." In defense against her mother's not-so-subtle hints about her attitude, Hulga declares: "If you want me, here I am--LIKE I AM." The statement sums up Hulga's determination to make herself more of a freak than her physical condition warrants. Doubting the assertion, McFarland points to Hulga's acceptance of her condition and observes that "it suggests that she is trying to insulate herself against the pain of difference and imperfection."[5] It is precisely Hulga's insistence upon "difference" that marks the equivocal quality of her mind in contrast with the majority of O'Connor's women who are univocally oriented. Hulga perceives differences only, refusing to make the connections that comparison or analogy requires. Lynch states that to the equivocal mind "everything is a private world; everything is a solipsism. All is absurd, lonely, a private hell."[6]

Likeness and difference form a major motif in the story. Mrs. Freeman's barb "Some people are more alike than others" is but one indicator. Manley Pointer's ruse in claiming a "heart condition" introduces a mock similarity between him and Hulga. Mrs. Hopewell's professing to keep a bible by the bedside is a

prevarication like Pointer's, though perhaps with lesser consequences. Hulga's mistaking Pointer for a naive person is inverted at the end when her own basic naiveté is revealed.

Although Hulga realizes Mrs. Freeman's avid curiosity about the wooden leg and thoroughly resents the woman's invasion of her privacy, her equivocal mentality keeps her from acknowledging the similarity between the bible salesman and the sharecropper's wife. Manley Pointer's clichés alone suffice to put him in the same category as the older woman, and Hulga would seem to know all about clichés, judging from her retort about "the salt of the earth." His later remark to her about being "a brave sweet little thing"--despite her evident bulkiness--only leads her to anticipate his insistence that she declare her love. Hulga is defenseless against the timeless trap of "proving" her statement. We can only assume she finally recognizes his bond with Mrs. Freeman when he says: "I know which end is up and I wasn't born yesterday and I know where I'm going."

In addition to Manley Pointer's use of clichés, he has the same eager look that Mrs. Freeman has; his eyes are "like two steel spikes" as compared to her "steel-pointed eyes." When Manley Pointer first looks at Hulga, she feels that she has met the expression

before, but cannot place it. Her failure to make the connection contributes to the story's comedy since she is so firmly convinced of her intelligence.

Hulga, one of O'Connor's favorite characters, was to have been the heroine of a projected comic novel, as we noted in the Introduction. We can only surmise the sort of comic terror that would have accompanied Hulga's full teeth-grinding recognition of revelation; the stripping away of the layers of such a complex personality in a full-length work would have indeed been fascinating. Interestingly enough, O'Connor described her own personality as a combination of Hulga's and Nelson's (from "The Artificial Nigger").[7] Some of the irony of Hulga's plight is reflected too in O'Connor's description of a reading session where Malcolm Cowley politely asked O'Connor if she had a wooden leg.[8] One may be inclined then to agree with Robert Coles' conjecture cited earlier that O'Connor regretted her own intellectual pride.

Precisely because of her fancied superior intelligence, Hulga remains one of the most memorable seductresses in American literature. The great comedy lies in her self-deception as the would-be temptress loses what she herself had planned to destroy--a soul. Since Hulga's leg metaphorically represents her interior

self, her loss is equal to her planned usurpation of the salesman's soul. While she gives a great deal of attention to abstract theory about belief, doubt, and denial, the contrasting details of her Vapex, T-shirt, and inept love-making provide the counterpoint requisite for superb comedy. Moreover, her physical defects add to the humor inasmuch as they symbolize the defects of her soul. Pointer's stealing Hulga's detachable "self" is so depraved that it becomes shockingly funny. It is possible to laugh because he does to Hulga literally what she had planned to do to him on a purely abstract plane.

Manley Pointer's vileness derives in part from the fact that be belies his name. He rejects the totality of the offered woman, who, despite her initial plan to seduce his soul, responds instead to his mere physicality, falling completely for Aphrodite's ruse, her reason ever retreating. Manley Pointer entraps her in a natural response for his own sordid purposes as fetishist--to secure her eyeglasses and her artificial appendage. His obscenity lies not in the puerile contents of his briefcase, but in his preference for wood and glass over living flesh that he has contrived to compromise. His evil is such a radical departure from the ostensible norm for good country people--even if we allow for irony--that the theft is horrifyingly funny. The simultaneous

toppling of Hulga from her self-appointed pedestal is of course a staple ingredient of comedy.

Hulga's satirical remarks about the Freeman girls seething in their fertility rituals and cycles contrast sharply with her simple failure to understand instinctual physical responses, particularly with such an unpromising partner. Her earlier surmise that "true genius can get an idea across even to an inferior mind" suggests endless ramifications on the nature of "true genius" when it appears to coincide with the scatological contents of the briefcase. Then, of course, her belief has the additional irony deriving from all the innuendoes associated with Hulga's hierarchical values of intellect. The final irony rests in Hulga's realization of her own failure to understand sexual instinct, people, or their potential for evil, and of the violence necessary for her own awakening to self-knowledge. Ultimately, Hulga's rationalization that she will take away all the bible salesman's shame and "turn it into something useful" is converted into our hope that she has gained a clearer insight through her experience. Many critics agree that Hulga, like Ruby Turpin, has a sufficient sense of humor to be saved. Kathleen Feeley goes so far as to state that Hulga will "realize the ridiculousness of her situation . . . and that she will renew her claim to Joy."[9]

Sarah Ruth of "Parker's Back," though as unseductive in appearance as Hulga, is more successful than the latter in the realm of the spirit. Hungry, skinny, and tough, she attracts Parker even if she has none of the qualities he looks for in women. For him, her charm lies in her absolutism. He courts, weds, and impregnates her during the course of the story, and wonders why he stays with her, since she is a terrible cook and sees everything in terms of sin. She refuses even to be jealous of his female employer, considering only the sinful possibilities in the situation. Following a tractor accident, he has a tattoo of Jesus put on his back, as a result of the accident and as an effort to please the terrible Sarah Ruth. She is not pleased because she refuses to believe that Jesus is God made man.

The haphazard tattoos on Parker's back signify his random pattern of life. Dishonorably discharged from the navy, the story's protagonist, an exemplar of machismo, finds fulfillment in his life through having his body tattooed, until even that is unsatisfactory when he runs out of frontal skin he can admire.

The woman he is attracted to is the daughter of a "Straight Gospel preacher, /who is/ away spreading it in Florida" when Parker first enters her life.

Sarah Ruth makes no real attempt to seduce Parker, yet her very indifference coupled with her totally absolutist vision is irresistible to him. When Parker, who apparently considers himself attractive to women, is first aware of Sarah Ruth's presence, he makes a commotion of pretending to have hurt his hand, cursing roundly. Instead of receiving the attention he expects, he is clouted by Sarah Ruth. Not only does the unexpected have its charm, but this initial encounter foreshadows Parker's final return. His mother had tried to get him into a revivalist meeting to cure him of his wanton youthful ways, but he had run away. Sarah Ruth's univocal fundamentalist beliefs--supported by an equally consistent use of the broom--evoke some subconscious memories of a more innocent life, coupled with a subconscious longing for a more purposeful one.

On the occasion of their second meeting when Parker brings apples to her large impoverished family, Sarah Ruth tells Parker she is not yet married--as if she expects that she will be. His fascination with her is a comic combination of his inability to comprehend the fascination and her matter-of-fact acceptance of it. When he tries to make love, she replies, "Not until after we're married." She does not like to look at his naked body, which is understandable in the light of its garishness. She has, moreover, a firm sense

of propriety for all acts. When he returns with the image of Christ on his back, eager to share his new manifestation of faith, she misinterprets his intention: "I ain't got to look at you. . . . And you ain't going to have me this near morning."

Sarah Ruth is indeed a terrible medium of grace, more terrible than the Greenleaf bull. Her comic irony lies in her fracturing of E. E. Parker's ego, in bringing down the macho man, both verbally and with wallops. Her final beating of the freshly tattooed Christ on his back brings him to a realization of his lies, his vanity. and the idolatry of his comic-strip body--the frightening comedy of O. E.'s return to his real name and destiny as Obadiah Elihue. Sarah Ruth is as complacent as any of the univocally minded women in her beliefs, but like the demonic con men, she makes her mark. Unlike any other O'Connor seductress, she holds a restless, searching male in place through her absolute beliefs.

Hazel Motes of Wise Blood, a novel that is pure comic romance, had a mother much like Sarah Ruth in her fundamentalist beliefs. She had impressed upon him such a sense of sin and guilt for looking at a naked woman in a sideshow that for all his life he would equate sin with women. Haze feels sin is necessary to deny the "ragged figure" of Jesus Christ who haunts him. The sideshow woman he had seen at the age of ten he first

thought was a "skinned animal" that lay squirming and grinning in a box "lined with black cloth." The death/coffin motif is a major one in the novel, carried through in all of his relationships with women. Those who offer sex to Haze invariably bear the grin of a death's head. Critics who misunderstand O'Connor's treatment of sexuality as a psychological quirk fail to see her rhetorical tradition, which goes back to the baroque wherein sex and death are always--shockingly--identified.

Haze is plagued by women from the beginning to the end of the novel. The reader is thus introduced to various females through their attraction to Haze. With the exception of three minor women who speak one line each, the females all play some variation on the mother motif, even Leora Watts and Sabbath Lily. Those variations, together with Haze's recollections of his mother and the sideshow woman, serve to merge the sexual and maternal elements of femininity, which Haze is barely able to survive. The blend certainly takes the pleasure out of the sin that he feels obligatory if he is to evade Jesus successfully.

The anticipation of Haze's fate lies in his opening conversation with Mrs. Wally Bee Hitchcock, his nosey companion on the train to Taulkinham. A prototype of the banal women previously discussed and a

motherly type, she asks questions, mentions kith and kin, and spouts clichés--all to establish Haze's homeless condition and his obsession with Jesus, in O'Connor's design. Haze quickly rids himself of her company by stating, "I reckon you think you been redeemed," to which she replies politely, though losing her eagerness to converse with him. She, along with the other females on the train, is described from a perspective centering on the most bizarre aspects of modern cosmetic chemistry, a perspective consistent with the descriptions of other women as they appear in the novel. Mrs. Hitchcock, for example, retiring for the night, "heavy and pink," her face framed by knobs "like dark toadstools," seems appropriate to a cartoon nightmare. In the dining car, Haze observes the "red-speared" hands of "three youngish women dressed like parrots," one of whom counterpoints Mrs. Hitchcock's Southern politeness by answering Haze's comment about redemption in "a poisonous Eastern voice." Mrs. Hitchcock, annoying as she is to Haze, at least has a "down-home" comfortableness about her that sets her apart from the more predatory women that await him in the city, concluding with Mrs. Flood, who insistently offers the maternal comforts of food and home as bait for marriage. Not surprisingly, she is rejected by Haze more emphatically than Mrs. Hitchcock is.

Upon arriving in Taulkinham, Haze sees advertised

on a bathroom wall "the friendliest bed in town." Determined to begin his life of denial of Jesus, Haze thus finds Leora Watts busy paring her toenails. When Haze notes her reflection in the mirror, she appears a distorted, grinning creature. In all their encounters, her grin is "as curved and sharp as the blade of a sickle," a metaphor connecting sex, death, and sin in Haze's mind. Leora Watts is also a vehicle for O'Connor's jabs at modern psychology, described as being "so well-adjusted she didn't have to think anymore." Haze does not leave her because of any recognized lack of thought, however, but because she cuts his hat into an obscene shape. Since his hat--"that Jesus-seeing hat!"--bears roughly the same significance as Hulga's leg, he revolts against the destruction of the outward sign of his inner self.

The second seductress Haze encounters is Sabbath Lily Hawks, the daughter of Asa Hawks, a man who poses as a blind preacher. Haze is fascinated by Asa's blindness, thinking the man can see something Haze cannot, though ostensibly repelled by the preacher's belief. The fifteen-year-old Sabbath Lily becomes enamored of Haze, attracted by his eyes: "They don't look like they see what he's looking at but they keep on looking." Still seeking a way to prove his independence from Jesus, Haze naively thinks seducing

the girl will accomplish that in addition to impressing Asa Hawks with the seriousness of The Church without Christ. Like Hulga, however, Haze is himself the object of seduction. Sabbath Lily, far from the victim Haze envisions, has her own plans. Her approaches to the reluctant seducer furnish much of the novel's raucous comedy. Haze works hard to "sin" with women, always having to remind himself of his intentions. The total effect is that Sabbath Lily is a greater penance than the rocks, stones, and barbed wire Haze uses, thus overturning any expectation of male aggressiveness. Indeed, one of the functions of Enoch Emery's characterization is to furnish a counterpoint to Haze's relationships with women, since Enoch so avidly pursues them, but is rebuffed at every café counter. In contrast, Haze is uninterested though invited.

Sabbath Lily is more interested in her body than Haze is. What he finds fascinating about her is that she is illegitimate, feeding his obsession with redemption. Sabbath Lily, however, seems currently satisfied with her lot as bastard, feeling that she is thus spared the pain of trying to enter the kingdom, though she once wrote a letter of concern over it to an advice columnist. In reply to the columnist's

prescription not to let religion "warf" her, Sabbath Lily responds that she is "adjusted okay to the modern world." In this respect she is humorously akin to Leora Watts. Furthermore, she grins as Leora does and also desecrates Haze's hat the first time they are in bed together, snatching it off his head, sending "it flying across the room in the dark," as she tells him, "Take off you hat, king of the beasts." Lily's love-name for Haze has ironic echoes later in Enoch's metamorphosis as gorilla when the latter is again rejected. Haze's aloofness and determined isolation make him, in contrast, a parody of the Byronic hero, irresistibly attractive to women.

Neatly tying together the motifs of mother/sex/death is the mummy, a likely "new jesus" to Enoch at least, who insists, much like Onnie Jay Holy, on the need to objectify Haze's abstraction. Just as Lily recognizes in the mummy's mutilated face "something in him of everyone she had ever known, as if they had all been rolled into one person and killed and shrunk and dried," so does the mummy represent mankind dead to grace, the logical result of Haze's Church without Christ, which Enoch seems intuitively to perceive. Lily not only recognizes the mummy's humanity, but also adopts it as her baby. As she enters, crooning to the creature,

Haze is trying on his mother's silver-rimmed glasses. Paralleling the distorted image of Leora Watts he sees in the mirror is the misshapen reflection of Lily holding the mummy, saying, "Call me Momma now." The mother and child are pathetically grotesque even without the distortion, which only adds to the surrealism of the scene. Haze flings the deformed mummy into the rain outside--there obviously being no shelter for the new jesus either. Haze perhaps unconsciously perceives the truth the mummy symbolizes as much as he rejects even a surrogate symbol of any product of his and Lily's union.

With his "trace of a grin covering his terrified look," the mummy is the objective correlative of the comically horrific life of flesh alone, a life Haze so desperately covets. "I want to like it," he answers Lily's offer of bedtime pleasure--but he never does. In discarding his mother's glasses along with the new jesus, Haze takes the first step on his real journey "home" because her rigid frame of vision caused him to equate sin with women. From the time he throws away her glasses, he no longer feels the need to prove his sinfulness with women. Although O'Connor's letters leave no doubt of her disapproval of sociological or Freudian criticism, Haze's discomfort with women is so blatantly related to his mother's reaction to his seeing

the woman in the sideshow that one cannot disregard the psychological implications. The mummy's masking his terror is a mirror image of Haze's reluctance to return to Leora's bed after his initial poor performance and his planned seduction of Lily--from which he retreats to no avail. The mummy's grin also mocks the grinning women who offer Haze sex.

In addition to Leora and Sabbath Lily, a minor character also reinforces this association of grinning, sex, and death with the triad of Haze, Enoch, and the mummy. The object of Enoch's attention from the bushes, the mother at the park pool swims with her two sons. His voyeurism results from a sense of propriety; the women at the pool have so little covering them anyway and minimize that by letting down their suit straps. When Haze goes to the pool in search of Enoch, he watches the woman emerge from the pool as might an amphibian monster: "First her face appeared, long and cadaverous, with a bandage-like bathing cap coming down almost to her eyes, and sharp teeth protruding from her mouth. Then she rose on her hands until a large foot and leg came up from behind her and another." The woman then faces the two men and grins. When she settles herself on the concrete and pulls down her suit straps, Haze runs, and Enoch looks "both ways at once."

The woman, whose hair is "all colors, from deep rust to a greenish yellow," joins Enoch and Haze at the mummy's case, still grinning. While Haze is gazing at the mummy, a reflection of the woman's face appears "grinning on the glass, over Hazel Motes's /face/." When Haze sees her thus reflected, his neck "jerk/s/ back and he /makes/ a noise. It might have come from the man inside the case." He flees again, with Enoch in pursuit.

Mother and sex inexorably blend with Leora's calling herself "momma" to Haze, with Lily's acting out the role of mother, and with Haze's revulsion for the monstrous mother in the park. Enoch's attraction to that figure probably results from his own motherless state in counterpoint to Haze's obsession. His adventure in frightening his overly religious adoptive mother with his nakedness and his subsequent wrong-headed efforts to win acceptance complete the comedy of the impossibility of escaping women, even in their absence. In his efforts to win approval, Enoch plays the clown against Haze's grimly stoic efforts to escape Jesus and therefore himself.

Haze cannot even successfully escape Sabbath Lily, whose nymphomania deprives him of his rest. When the avaricious Mrs. Flood learns, however, that Haze

is willing to give Lily any amount of money to be rid of her, the landlady has Lily put in a detention home. With that, Mrs. Flood becomes the woman in Haze's life. Her pursuit of him has nothing to do with sex. In fact, after he blinds himself and sits on the front porch while Mrs. Flood talks, she is described as one who looks as if she is being "courted by a corpse." Mrs. Flood rather attempts to seduce Haze from his lonely, penitential quest through her offers of shelter and food. At first she is attracted by his government check because she cannot "look at anything steadily without wanting it." She undergoes a change, though, becoming convinced that Haze has a worthwhile secret knowledge that would benefit her in her old age and death. For that reason, she tries to force him into marriage. Haze flees--his recurrent pattern--but this time it brings about his death.

Although Mrs. Flood's unswerving insistence on marriage is terrifying, she furnishes the comedy of a secular reaction to Haze's repentance: "It's not normal. It's like one of them gory stories, it's something that people have quit doing--like boiling in oil or being a saint or walling up cats. There's no reason for it. People have quit doing it." In the univocally modern manner, she "thanks her stars" that she is not "religious or morbid." Like Tanner's

daughter and other Marthas, she offers all the bodily comforts. She tries to think of an outlet for him, like guitar playing; she even advocates his preaching again. Mrs. Flood simply does not understand.

Her life had been "without pleasure and without pain," rather terribly comic in itself, and she desperately feels that in her life's "last part" she "deserve/s/ a friend." When Haze leaves in the inclement weather, she thinks, "He'll be back. Let the wind cut into him a little." She still overestimates practical values like food and shelter. During his night's absence, however, she weeps. Mrs. Flood is one of those respectable, pragmatic women who see surfaces only, who have no understanding of other people, much less of mystery. Her miscalculation of Haze's determination is foreshadowed by her slowness in understanding what Leora and Lily recognized right away--that he was lying when he named his church. Just as she looks and looks into his "deep burned eye sockets" during his life, so does she stare when his corpse is returned: "She leaned closer and closer to his face, looking deep into them, trying to see how she had been cheated or what had cheated her, but she couldn't see anything. . . . She sat staring . . . and felt as if she had finally got to the beginning of something she couldn't begin." Although Mrs. Flood

is not capable of receiving the grace of understanding, she finally confronts the possibility that bread alone does not explain all of life for everyone. The irony of her remark to the dead man that he has at last come home complements and completes Haze's initial conversation with Mrs. Hitchcock concerning "home." Like Walter of "Why Do the Heathen Rage?" and other restless O'Connor males, Haze remains in life "homeless here and homeless anywhere" in contrast with the women happy in a fixed place.

In addition to the major women in Haze's story who literally plague him to death with offers of sex or home cooking, other female characters appear briefly though memorably, each contributing to the effect of life on an alien planet. In addition to the predatory effect of the initial "red-speared" hands and the suggestion of exotic, empty mimicking by the "parrot-clad" Eastern women on the train, we are introduced to the frustration of the waitress who can survive a job that exposes her to "nasty boys" only with the help of a fruit jar filled with whiskey under the counter. She curses Enoch roundly while advising Haze to stay away from him. Comically violent in her miserable drunkenness, she once again demonstrates Haze's attractiveness to women, as she discriminates between the clean and unclean.

Another waitress has "green eyes set in pink," resembling a "picture behind her of a Lime-Cherry Surprise." Not only is her appearance surprising, but also the description is related to her misunderstanding of Enoch and to his surprise for Haze, the mummy. Yet another waitress has "a big yellow dental plate and the same color hair done up in a black hairnet." The hideous color combinations reflect the unnatural garishness of urban life as well as the general tendency of the women in the novel to make themselves bizarre. A monochromatic study, the ticket seller at a movie house wears glasses with rhinestones and has "white hair stacked in sausages around her head." Mrs. Hitchcock's "toadstool" curlers are matched by Mrs. Flood's hair clustering "like grapes." The Dali-esque portraits of these various and sundry women not only provoke laughter and repugnance, but also emphasize the feeling that the two men, far from their rural home, are adrift at cross-purposes in a world where recognizable humans are replaced by synthetic monstrosities.

The nightmarish qualities of the women are emphasized in Haze's second dream, paralleling his first one on the train to Taulkinham. Both dreams are death related. The train berth of the first parallels the car of the second, with coffin imagery in each case. While the first dream merges into a recollection of his

youth, the second dream equates women with the death experience. First, three women look him over as if he were a piece of merchandise in the surrealistic sequence. Then the teratoid woman from the pool appears, pushing her boys out of the way and indicating that she will climb into his car and keep him company for awhile; but in this dream of death, Haze is protected by the glass of the car/coffin.

His dream reflects his consciousness of himself as an object of women's voracious appetites. His dream in the car/coffin is an ironic inversion of the role played by the woman in the sideshow in her glass box. The end lies in the beginning. His mother's etching of guilt upon his soul for looking at a sexual object in a glass box creates the set of images that color the remainder of Haze's life: distorted, grinning women offering the necessary sin to confirm his rebellion. Rather than being freed by his determined efforts with Leora and Sabbath Lily, Haze becomes even more locked in the equation of women with sin and death--until he discards his mother's glasses. Then he is free of one major obligation to sin. Haze's flight from Jesus is comically nightmarish in a world peopled by women who are caricatures and variations on Harpies and Sirens, a bad dream from which Haze awakens--only to die.

NOTES

CHAPTER III

[1]*Invisible Parade: The Fiction of Flannery O'Connor* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1972), p. 59.

[2]*Images of Faith*, pp. 106-08.

[3]*The Image Industries* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1959), p. 143.

[4]"To John Hawkes," 20 April 1961, in *The Habit of Being*, p. 439.

[5]*Flannery O'Connor*, p. 37.

[6]*Christ and Apollo*, p. 130.

[7]"To 'A'," 6 September 1966, in *The Habit of Being*, p. 101.

[8]"To Sally and Robert Fitzgerald," 10 June 1955, in *The Habit of Being*, p. 85.

[9]*Voice of the Peacock*, p. 25.

CONCLUSION

Although Flannery O'Connor did not live to complete her comic novel about an angular woman approaching God "with ground teeth," she did present a rich variety of hard-headed women who experience some sort of violence, not only to themselves or their property, but also to their cherished beliefs. As we have seen, both the ridiculous and the terrible in O'Connor's women derive mainly from their univocality: the Marthas with their work ethic and its inevitable social order; the mothers with their ideas of propriety for their respective children; and the seductresses with sex or home. Although Hulga is as ludicrous and sad as the univocal types, she is the one character whose imagination is equivocal, incapable of recognizing similarities. O'Connor herself writes from the analogical point of view, "the home of the comic."[1] With the exceptions of Mrs. Turpin and Mrs. Cope, the stories discussed contain no woman with an analogical point of view. The burden, therefore, is on the reader to furnish connections.

With the absence of the authorial voice in the women's stories, no moralizing is present. Nor is there anything pietistic in O'Connor's art, complaining as she did that religious literature was guaranteed to

corrupt nothing but one's taste. Along with her adherence to St. Thomas's dictum of the good of art in itself for no utilitarian end, she often cited Henry James' definition of the morality of fiction as that of the degree of "felt life" it shows.[2] On O'Connor's own terms, then, her fiction must be evaluated as art first. Her art cannot be divorced, however, from the understanding of her concern with the faithlessness of the relentless Marthas and weak Magdalenes of the modern world. As May states, the contemporary world has been forced "to witness an anachronistic wedding of art and belief."[3] That is not to say, however, that one must share O'Connor's belief to enter into the spirit of her art. As Lynch carefully explains, the concerns of faith and art are not mutually exclusive: both are interested in the complexity of man, and both deal with the barrenness of modern life. Most fiction treats problems of the interior self, whether written by those who profess a strong belief or not. Once one has moved through the endless banal clichés of O'Connor's women, for example, and observed the rigidity and minuteness of their horizons, one need not be a staunch believer to conclude that surely something is amiss in these lives.

O'Connor's gift lay in conveying the often appalling but recognizable facts of existence. The

speech of the Marthas, the mothers, the sharecroppers, and the blacks is familiar both in its intonations and in its content to those conversant with the time and place of the settings. To others, the fallacies are also apparent in their universalism: Pelagianism, Manicheanism, or the banal modernism of "television as an inspiration." Satirizing the women, O'Connor shows the "absurdity of disbelief," as John Hawkes states.[4] In doing so, she affirms human value rather than negates it, as some critics aver. For had she not realized human, womanly potential, she could not have written of the absence of its realization.

Nor does her habit of fastening upon the bizarre details of physical appearance indicate negativism: such details enforce the concept of misplaced faith. If the women's descriptions in terms of cabbages and turnips are naturalistic, they serve nonetheless to suggest character attributes. Furthermore, she writes of a naturalistic world about to be assaulted by a mysterious force. Richard Pearce states:

> In each case we are prepared for the apocalyptic image by a portent of irrational threat presented with comic detachment. The threat has little effect on the characters, for they have developed blinders to the possibilities of human life. The world is turned upside down by a comic surprise, and in each case, with the apocalypse, human value is unexpectedly asserted in a world without meaning.[5]

In the "world without meaning" lies part of the comedy and the horror. The women try to manufacture meaning through their various misplaced faiths, a realistic enough phenomenon. The complacency of the women, fixed in place and thought, makes them rather mechanical: the violent event is both comical and terrible in its suddenness and in its consequences. In some cases, however, out of the comedy and terror that is everyday life, comes insight: the women are so self-insulated that a shattering experience is necessary to strip away their delusions.

Undoubtedly, the ontological malaise of the women is sometimes shared by readers, who may have their own delusions shattered as well. The twentieth-century audience requires violence, as O'Connor often noted, just as her hard-headed characters do. In order to force a new awareness of the familiar, she shatters cherished, sentimentalized stereotypes of women--maternal, erotic, or intellectual. The traditional roles are viewed in the unflattering illumination of comedy. As stated in the introduction, only twice does O'Connor present women who portray the ideal of compassionate femininity: the black women in "The Artificial Nigger" and The Violent Bear It Away. It is not true, however, that women are more culpable

than men in the canon. Women are simply more numerous in O'Connor's fiction. This imbalance is captured perfectly in "A Circle in the Fire" by Boyd's exclamation, "Jesus, another woman!"

Eggenschwiler states what we have seen in the women's stories, that they try--usually unsuccessfully--to evade themselves in their "spiritless world of objects, duties, and restricted conceptions of what they are." He follows this by noting that O'Connor is equally adept in interpreting "the despair of manliness."[6] Although O'Connor gives equal time to the errors of both sexes, as we noted, she does assign certain qualities predominantly to women: self-satisfaction, a fixed place, and perceptions more limited than those of the male. In contrast, the male is dissatisfied, restless, possessing a sense of loss or incompleteness. Often the male serves as a disruptive force, intruding into a relatively tranquil feminine setting, like Mr. Guizac in "The Displaced Person," the urban delinquents in "A Circle in the Fire," the bull--fronting for his owners--in "Greenleaf," Manley Pointer in "Good Country People," Mr. Shiftlet in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," Parker in "Parker's Back," Singleton in "The Partridge Festival," and even the imaginary Lot in "The Crop."

Other stories develop conflicts involving a woman's trying to bring some recalcitrant male round

to her limited sphere: Haze Motes of Wise Blood, Julian in "Everthing That Rises Must Converge," Asbury in "The Enduring Chill," Thomas in "The Comforts of Home," Old Dudley in "The Geranium," Old Tanner in "Judgement Day," and Walter in "Why Do the Heathen Rage?" "Revelation" is unique in that the opposing characters are both feminine. The women are notably independent, even those who exhibit fondness for a male, like Ruby Turpin--even the one compassionate woman, Thomas's mother. In light of O'Connor's dislike of softness, Mrs. McIntyre's dependence upon men and the resulting crime is curiously singular.

The women in a class share common characteristics, yet each is unique in her degree of comedy and terror, giving a cumulative effect of a richly populated microcosm of embattled farm managers, warring mothers and children, and grinning seductresses. The glasses worn by the majority of the women serve to emphasize their spiritual myopia, the distorted vision that creates the comedy and terror of the world of O'Connor femininity.

NOTES

CONCLUSION

[1]*Christ and Apollo*, p. 108.

[2]"To 'A'," 15 September 1955, in *The Habit of Being*, p. 103.

[3]*The Pruning Word*, p. xiii.

[4]"Flannery O'Connor's Devil," *Sewanee Review*, LXX (1962), 397.

[5]*Stages of the Clown*, p. 73.

[6]*The Christian Humanism of Flannery O'Connor*, pp. 45-46.

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Date of Examination:

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