

PURGATIVE GRACE, ANAGOGICAL VISION, AND VIOLENCE AGAINST NIHILISM IN
FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S FICTION

by

Courtenay N Dudek

B.A. (Eastern University) 2003

Portfolio

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

HUMANITIES

in the

GRADUATE SCHOOL

of

HOOD COLLEGE

November 2022

Accepted:

Dr. Cory Campion

Program Director

Dr. Noel Verzosa
Committee Member

Dr. Didier Course
Committee Member

April M. Boulton, Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School

Dr. Karen Hoffman
Portfolio Advisor

INTRODUCTION

This introduction will help the reader begin to understand the idea of grace and suffering as agents of redemption. The introduction will also help explain the use of the anagogical that O'Connor employed to her stories. The anagogical is a layering of meaning and seeing different levels of reality in one image. Finally, I also explain how the incarnation pertains to grace and the redemption of a person in mind and body. I explain what grace is in the perspective of Thomas Aquinas and Flannery O'Connor and continue with the idea of purgation as means of grace to turn from one direction to another. Grace is not an abstract concept, but a person, Christ, divine though he was according to Aquinas and O'Connor. Grace can also be seen as the uncreated energies of God, as the Orthodox term it, which enable a person to become more like Christ—Christ being the source and exemplification of grace. O'Connor says, "God became man partly in order to teach us [how to be a good person], but it is impossible to be one without the help of grace."¹ Grace in O'Connor's work presents an opportunity for the person to choose or reject that grace presented. O'Connor shows us through her stories that people need assistance along the way in order to become someone different. Suffering that *purgates* the person is a means of awakening to the divine, but also to recognize the limitations of the ego and self-sufficiency of the person. Suffering in this life also gives a person an opportunity to be vulnerable to grace, but it is up to each person to either choose that opening to the divine or to reject. If the incarnation and the bodily resurrection of the dead is true (which Christianity claims), the redemption of the human person is related to the body, mind, and soul. Redemption is a reordering of our loves, in other words, if conversion is a series of turnings toward the good, then our ideas of who matters in this world changes.

¹ Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), 147.

O'Connor emphasized the importance of the body as well as the material world; the incarnation, according to Aquinas, elevates the material world as a way for the divine to be present through it. O'Connor saw the danger of abstract, Manichean thought influencing Christianity. In short, Manicheism focused on the spiritual over and above the material. She was also concerned about nihilism infiltrating, not only culture, but the Christian church. Her counter argument to these dangers within American culture and within Christianity was grace and an incarnational theology, which are constant tenants in Christian theology. Aquinas had a significant influence on her theology, especially his arguments concerning the incarnation and what he wrote on faith, reason, and grace. He said, "Christ is the origin of grace."² Additionally, within O'Connor's stories there is an element of suffering because she is a realist, suffering in this life is inevitable, but it is not meaningless. Some have called this life the purgatorial journey leading toward the good, toward God, toward paradise.³ O'Connor refers to St. Catherine of Genoa and Baron von Hugel on the teaching of purgatory, which is further explored in the chapter in this portfolio "Purgation and the Anagogical in Flannery O'Connor's 'Revelation' and 'The Displaced Person.'"

In terms of the incarnation and suffering, Aquinas' argument is that, because Christ was incarnate, he took on human nature and so was prone to suffering, "what belongs to human nature involves defect, as to die, to suffer, and the like."⁴ Aquinas goes on to argue that the hypostasis of the two natures of Christ are applicable to God.⁵ Aquinas refers to Romans 1:20

² Thomas Aquinas, translated by Ralph McInerny, *Selected Writings*, (Penguin Books, 1998), 12.

³ Dante has written this story, the journey downward, moving to the journey upward, up the purgatorial mountain that is painful but always leading toward joy, toward eventual paradise. The foot of the purgatorial mountain has been called the ante-room of heaven. Anna Aresi, speaking about T. S. Eliot and Dante, gives good support of the spiritual journey: [The] "*Four Quartets* is an intellectual and spiritual journey starting from a basis in material reality and arriving, through philosophy and by grace, at the contemplation of the divine." "Dante in T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*," *Literature and Theology*, 30, 4, (December 2016), 399.

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Selected Writings*, 756.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 757.

“Men can from the things that are made come to knowledge of the invisible things of God.” He goes on to argue that God (as Godhead or Father) can be known to exist. He argues that God cannot be known, but to know that God exists by the effects, “a thing is not known through its own form but through its effect, the form of the effect takes the place of the form of the thing: it is from the effect itself that the cause is known to exist.”⁶ In other words, God transcends our finite understanding and minds, but since, according to Aquinas, goodness and love are known because God is their cause, therefore, God can be known by these effects. Aquinas goes on to argue the three persons of God as being One. Later, he argues the logic of the incarnation. He says,

The divine and human natures, although they are maximally distant, nonetheless come together in one subject through the mystery of the incarnation. ‘God is man,’ is in neither remote nor contingent matter, but in natural matter. And God is predicated of God, not incidentally, as of its own subject, not indeed by reason of the form signified by the term God, but by reason of the subject, which is hypostasis of human nature.⁷

Aquinas is arguing the hypostatic union of the three persons of God, which was established as orthodox in the fifth century. The incarnation seems to be the key to how grace works within a person to potentially change or transform that person, in that, according to Christian theology, Christ was fully human and divine, therefore, matter and human beings have the opportunity to become like that which is divine by the incarnation of Christ. “Habitual grace is likened to a new nature. [Aquinas says], ‘the infused virtues dispose man in a higher way and to a higher end. This is an ordering towards a participated divine nature and when we receive this nature, we are regenerated as Sons of God.’ Habitual grace is a quality... infused in the essence of the soul.”⁸

⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Selected Writings*, 118.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 752-753.

⁸ John Meinert, “St. Thomas Aquinas, Perseverance, and the Nature/Grace Debate,” *Angelicum*, 93, 4, (2016), 825.

O'Connor is in good company with this theologian and philosopher. Like the medieval thinker, in general, O'Connor emphasizes the body and not the spiritual alone within her stories; she was not an escapist. The incarnation gives evidence of the divine being present as well as affecting the human being in the person's choice of imitating the divine because of grace presenting an opportunity that awakens or ruptures one's own idea of self-sufficiency and finiteness. The characters in O'Connor's stories encounter this grace that shows their limitations and opens an opportunity to become someone to imitate Christ or to reject. If grace was incarnate in the form of Jesus Christ, then the encounter of grace in others and in matter begins with our senses, which affects our minds, bodies, and souls.

O'Connor certainly had her share of joys and suffering. She was diagnosed with Lupus at the age of twenty-five and died at the age of thirty-nine. All the while, suffering from the effects of the auto-immune disease, she wrote some of the most beloved, jarring, shocking stories that were, however, filled with moments of grace. Fiction, to O'Connor, is based in the senses.

The beginning of human knowledge is through the senses, and the fiction writer begins where human perception begins...appeals through the senses, and you cannot appeal to the senses with abstractions. But the world of the fiction writer is full of matter.... The Manicheans separated spirit and matter. They sought pure spirit and tried to approach the infinite directly without any mediation of matter. ...[F]iction is so very much an incarnational art.⁹

Ralph McInerney in Thomas Aquinas' *Selected Writings*, points out Aristotle's claim, "All our intellectual knowledge takes its rise from the senses," which pervades Aquinas's intellectual work. We are "most at home... with what we can grasp of the things we see and touch and hear... [which] can lead to knowledge...even beyond the sensible world."¹⁰ In the theology of the incarnation, grace is a meeting of the divine within the material world; grace is a

⁹ Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), 67-68. Also: Bernard of Clairveux argues that contemplation begins with the things of the world, the senses, and philosophy serves as "a stepping stone to the things invisible."

¹⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Selected Writings*, xviii.

participation in the divine nature within the human person, which subsequently has the “power” to re-generate that person.¹¹ Much of the time the encounter with grace is a jarring encounter, according to O’Connor. She said in her prayer journal, before suffering from Lupus and before becoming a writer, “I am afraid of pain and I suppose that is what we have to have to get grace. Give me the courage to stand the pain to get the grace, Oh Lord. Help me with this life that seems so treacherous, so disappointing.”¹² Again, pain and suffering may open the person to grace because the defenses are down, the ego less powerful, the body potentially vulnerable and the person recognizes their finiteness and mortality or, adversely, the person may become embittered.

O’Connor relied on her Thomistic views of reason and grace, but also read the modern humanist Catholics, such as Teilhard and Baron von Hugel. Von Hugel, like Aquinas, agreed that grace worked through human nature and matter. Von Hugel says, “supernatural experience always appears as the transfiguration of natural conditions.”¹³ Grace being something that comes from elsewhere, yet seen through the natural. He also viewed God’s grace as purgatorial,¹⁴ as a fire that refines and perfects and redeems by Divine Love, which is seen in the stories, “The Displaced Person,” and “Revelation,” as well as in her novels *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear It Away*. O’Connor says, “I believe that God’s love for us is so great that He does not wait until we are purified to such a great extent before He allows us to receive Him. ... Water is a symbol of purification and fire is another. ... Fire is the kind of purification we bring on ourselves—as in

¹¹ John Meinert, 826. Referring to Aquinas’ concept of grace. This also applies to the sacraments, which Aquinas talks more about, but the idea of grace being present in simple matter such as water and bread and wine (sacraments of baptism and Eucharist).

¹² Flannery O’Connor, *A Prayer Journal*, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 10.

¹³ William M. Kirkland, “Baron von Hugel and Flannery O’Connor,” *The Flannery O’Connor Bulletin*, 18, (1989), 37.

¹⁴ He wrote commentary on St. Catherine of Genoa, who wrote on Purgatory.

Purgatory. It is our evil which is naturally burnt away when it comes anywhere near God.”¹⁵ The reason for suffering¹⁶ is potentially because of original sin in each person, which divine grace assists in re-generating that person. In a more basic sense, we are creatures; God is divine and other, and yet, the incarnation allows for the possibility of human beings to participate in the divine. According to Eastern Orthodox and Catholic theology, we are created in the image of God, but like a mirror have shattered that reflection (to use a metaphor) and grace begins to mend that marred reflection, re-generating that person. The incarnation enables this re-generation because Christ has two natures, the hypostatic union. Aquinas says, “The two natures in Christ are united in one person, by reason of which union the divine nature is said to be incarnate and the human nature deified.”¹⁷ The two natures of Christ, if the incarnation is true, subsequently claim that the divine can be present or work through material things, such as sacraments but also that likeness to Christ within a human person who is “affected” by the grace of God. It seems that since suffering is something that takes place because we are mortal or because suffering is just the way of the world and existence, suffering¹⁸ may play a role in a person desiring what is beyond this existence—that is, God. And yet, in most of O’Connor’s stories, the characters are blind to their own ideas and toward others that it takes a shock of grace to wake them up and

¹⁵ *The Habit of Being*, 387.

¹⁶ When I speak of suffering, it is in body, mind, and conscience, but also referring to suffering of Christ—the effect on others upon him, but also lamenting, and literal bodily suffering in death. In O’Connor’s characters, there is suffering of conscience, guilt, affects others have on them, depression, malaise, abuse in some stories. Suffering is not a good in itself and should not be sought out or continue toleration of someone’s affliction, yet suffering has the potential of making someone suffer with those who are or have been oppressed and abused, but also suffering may lead someone to become more open to the divine or become religious.

¹⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Selected Writings*, 759.

¹⁸ Jessica Hooten Wilson, in her speech on suffering and O’Connor tells us that O’Connor thought of suffering as a way to overcome a mediocre faith, instead of being lukewarm, that suffering is a conduit toward grace and a way to sainthood. That to be a Christian is the way of the cross and not a warm electric blanket, which O’Connor said. Wilson refers to Leon Bloy, a French novelist who said the greatest tragedy is to not become a saint. Wilson also argues that to share another’s burden or suffering relieves another’s suffering. Reference: Jessical Hooten Wilson, “‘With One Eye Squinted,’ Flannery O’Connor and the Call to Suffering,” YouTube Video, Sept. 22, 2017, The Table Conference, length 19:45, <https://youtu.be/uwBQYj69Sk0>.

present an opportunity to change, diminishing the ego and complacency, but ultimately to love one's neighbor. O'Connor's stories, like Aquinas' ideas, suggest that without a moment of grace through suffering, one may not be able to sustain this love for the neighbor without participating in the divine and without outside help.¹⁹

The final key to understanding O'Connor's fiction is the anagogical sense of interpretation, which originates in a fourfold medieval interpretation of scripture. The anagogical vision, as O'Connor puts it, is the kind "that is able to see different levels of reality in one image or one situation."²⁰ She continues to explain the medieval approach of scriptural interpretation, further, the anagogical "had to do with the Divine life and our participation in it."²¹ Peter M. Candler sums up the anagogical approach well, he says,

according to the patristic and medieval traditions, the anagogical sense is that 'through which speech is borne over to the invisible things to come.' The anagogical sense leads one through the contemplation of future glory to the reimagination of temporal existence in light of the Incarnation, as imbued with the grace of divine creation and ordered towards its consummation. The world—including most especially humanity—becomes more truly visible for what it is.²²

If we are to employ an anagogical view to her work, incarnational grace is a key that unlocks much of her fiction and a reminder that the re-generation is not only beginning in this life, but will ultimately be fulfilled afterward. In other words, the lame will not always be so, divisions in human interactions and within the human heart will not always be present. Ordinary objects in her stories can become representations of divine things, but also the reader will recognize moments of grace in her stories where the character may suffer or be harmed, but there is a turning point or re-generative aspect in that character's life. For instance, the peacock in "The

¹⁹ Even one who does not believe can still participate in the divine because if there is a God and the virtues or values exist because of someone divine, belief does not necessarily matter, because it seems even atheists care about decency, whereas, the nihilist does not; hence, why O'Connor saw nihilism a threat rather than atheism.

²⁰ Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 72.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Peter M. Candler Jr., "The Anagogical Imagination of Flannery O'Connor," *Christianity and Literature*, 60,1, (Autumn 2010), 12.

Displaced Person” may represent divinity in general, but also a reminder of the transfiguration, as the priest in the story points out—the transfiguration of Christ, but also pointing toward the parousia and the transfiguration of all things, the teleological consummation of time. The reader will also recognize the purgatorial ideas in “The Displaced Person” and “Revelation.” In light of grace, the reader may see the waking effect and the opportunity presented to heed the divine, with the possibility of the re-generation or transformation of that person. We see the beginnings of this dawn in the stories: “Revelation,” “Good Country People,” “The Comforts of Home,” “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” and “The Lame Shall Enter First.”

O’Connor thought that it is the way to read nature and the fiction writer should employ these multi-levels in their writing if it is to become a permanent part of literature. “It seems to be a paradox that the larger and more complex the personal view, the easier it is to compress it into fiction.”²³ O’Connor is concerned with the entire story telling the mysteries²⁴ (mystery of grace regenerating a person, usually the unexpected character in the story, also the mystery of the incarnation being the origin and vehicle of that grace) of this existence rather than having pat and simple answers. She saw the world imbued by the incarnation, not as dualistic oppositions; she rejected a Manichean view of nature versus grace, form versus content, body versus soul—her Christian view was incarnational unity.

O’Connor’s short story, “Parker’s Back” exemplifies this contrast of incarnational Christianity versus a Manichean influenced Christianity in the characters of Parker and his wife Sarah Ruth. O’Connor urged that fiction must be concrete and not abstract for this very reason--

²³ *Mystery and Manners*, 73.

²⁴ Kallistos Ware, a bishop in the Greek Orthodox Church tells us, “A mystery is... something that is revealed for our understanding, but which we never understand exhaustively because it leads into the depth or the darkness of God. The eyes are closed— but they are also opened.” Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995), 15.

grace working through matter, rather than enlightened abstraction. O'Connor called herself a Christian realist, always emphasizing an incarnational, concrete reality. In other words, the spiritual and the material are not at war with one another. ... Sarah Ruth represents the Christian who "newly" interprets Scripture as disincarnate. She quotes the Bible well, but misinterprets it. She separates the spirit and body like the Manicheans. God is only spirit to Sarah Ruth, whereas Parker who didn't, at first, believe, has a burning bush moment and gets a tattoo of the Pantocrator on his back—the Christ who is incarnate. Parker sees the God who is, the God who demands all, and transforms each into the likeness of Himself.²⁵ O'Connor said, fiction is "so very much an incarnational art."²⁶ She emphasized the importance of the body, not just the mind. She understood the complexity of this life and the reality of mystery.

Concerning the art of writing, O'Connor says,

To know oneself is to know one's region. It is also to know the world, ...and also, paradoxically, a form of exile from that world. ...And to know oneself is, above all, to know what one lacks. It is to measure oneself against Truth, and not the other way around. The first product of self-knowledge is humility. ...St. Cyril of Jerusalem, in instructing catechumens, wrote: 'The dragon sits by the side of the road, watching those who pass. Beware lest he devour you. We go to the Father of Souls, but it is necessary to pass by the dragon.'²⁷

She relates this to the courage the storyteller must exhibit in writing and telling how the world is, but also the Truth of the possibility of redemption and regeneration through grace. In regards to suffering, to tell the Truth, at times, will be misunderstood or ridiculed. She was, in a sense, an exile in the world of writers, she lived in Milledgeville, Georgia confined to her mother's house, due to her debilitating disease, writing about the world, suffering, grace and subsequent potential regeneration. She corresponded mostly by letter to her friends and editors, yet she faithfully attended church in her hometown and was not above or isolated from the reality of the harshness

²⁵ Ralph Wood, *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South*, (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 50.

²⁶ *Mystery and Manners*, 68.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

and suffering of the world around her. She was not isolated within her own mind or her own context. What she is saying, in the quote above, is that as a writer, one must face oneself and the world with its pleasantries, but also its real harshness, problems, sufferings, vices and sins. The writer must write boldly, but also admitting to the finiteness of understanding the world and the divine and its mysteries.

Finally, what does nihilism have to do with grace, regeneration, and suffering? Nihilism has to do with nothing, so in all respect, it has nothing to do with grace and regeneration. It may still have something to do with suffering, but possibly more related to despair or possibly even the meaninglessness of suffering. O'Connor has a short story "Good Country People," where the main character, Hulga is an existential nihilist. The main point of the story is that even in one's own ideas of nihilism, because there is presence rather than absence, according to O'Connor, even grace can penetrate the surety of Hulga's mind through an act of betrayal by someone she hoped to deceive. The "Bible salesman" in the story ends up being the true nihilist, he even says, "I've been believing in nothing" for most of my life. He steals her most intimate part of herself, her prosthetic leg. This act of deceit turns her world that she was so sure of upside down—people are not who they always seem. There is a possible inbreaking of grace, in a possible changing of Hulga's mind that instead of nothing, there may be something. What happens to her creates pain, which opens her to the opportunity of grace changing her outlook and her own idea of self-sufficiency. Hulga suffers a blow to her ego, which potentially may lead her to a re-generation.

In *Practice in Christianity*, Soren Kierkegaard speaks of the abased Jesus Christ who calls those who are lowly and common, not the glorified Christ. The "sinners, tax collectors, lepers, and madmen ... merely to let oneself be helped by him meant to risk one's honor, life and

goods.”²⁸ This is the Christ O’Connor presents to us and to her characters (who really are us), the abased Christ who knows our suffering and calls us. Her characters encounter a God who embraces the lowly, the outcast, but the encounter will not always be pleasant, but will be transformative. “Like Kierkegaard, they become Christians by destroying the mass-produced Christ of Christendom.”²⁹ On the other hand, those who believe themselves to be righteous or who have no need for God or “superstition” also encounter God and the encounter is, again, not pleasant, some kind of shock or suffering occurs. O’Connor shows her readers the attributes of God as humble, abased, suffering with, but also a just, yet loving God who reveals to the characters who they are, who God is—leaving it up to the person to decide who they will be. Kierkegaard talks about the admirer versus the imitator and claims, “only the imitator is the true Christian.”³⁰ Jonathan Rogers describes her stories well:

The violence, the sudden death, the ugliness in O’Connor’s fiction are large figures drawn for the almost-blind. If the stories offend conventional morality, it is because the gospel itself is an offense to conventional morality. Grace is a scandal; it always has been. Jesus put out the glad hand to lepers and cripples and prostitutes and losers of every stripe even as he called the self-righteous a brood of vipers.³¹

Three papers are presented in this portfolio: “The Shock of Grace in Flannery O’Connor’s Fiction,” “Purgation and the Anagogical in Flannery O’Connor’s ‘Revelation’ and ‘The Displaced Person,’” and “Been Believing in Nothing: Existentialism in Flannery O’Connor’s Fiction.” The chapter, “The Shock of Grace in Flannery O’Connor’s Fiction,” explores the idea of the bullet of grace identified as a shock from a definition of Aquinas’s and Baron von Hugel, which is seen in several of O’Connor’s short stories. It is a grace that wakes

²⁸ Soren Kierkegaard, translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, *Practice in Christianity*, (Princeton University Press, 1991), 37.

²⁹ Anthony, Di Renzo, *American Gargoyles Flannery O’Connor and the Medieval Grotesque*, (Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), 42.

³⁰ Soren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 254.

³¹ Jonathan Rogers, *The Terrible Speed of Mercy*, (Thomas Nelson, 2012), xvi.

and makes one vulnerable to the divine. There is a struggle between the reasonable and right thing to do and that of faith in fear and trembling. The “reprobate” characters are lauded as those who turn toward God because they are potentially more open to the struggle within the self rather than those who “know better” and are seen as righteous. This is the offense of the gospel once again. I think Baron von Hugel sums up the struggle of religion and grace well, “religion has never made me happy; it’s no use shutting your eyes to the fact that the deeper you go, the more alone you will find yourself. Suffering can expand, it can contract. Religion has never made me comfy. I have been in the deserts ten years. All deepened life is deepened suffering, deepened dreariness. Suffering and joy. The final note of religion is joy.”³² Like Von Hugel, O’Connor sees suffering as a way that has the potential to open someone to the divine, even if someone suffers and dies, that is not the end, the end is joy, that is the redemption of the whole person, body and mind and soul.

The chapter, “Purgation and the Anagogical in Flannery O’Connor’s ‘Revelation’ and ‘The Displaced Person,’” illuminates the idea of purgation and suffering as a way toward grace and redemption and change of conscience toward each fellow person one encounters. The character Mrs. Turpin sees herself as righteous and better than others, but a purgative grace leads her to a revelation, revealing that the first shall be last. The anagogical sense of layering in this story is employed pointing toward eschatological telos. Mrs. Turpin as well as Mrs. McIntyre in “The Displaced Person” both represent what Kierkegaard describes as those not “wish[ing] to do away with all these virtues; on the contrary, they want—at a cheap price—to have as comfortably as possible the appearance of and the reputation for practicing them.”³³ Purgation is a journey

³² William M. Kirkland, “Baron von Hugel and Flannery O’Connor,” 37.

³³ Soren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 60.

from ego, burning it away, a re-ordering toward humility, allowing for grace to re-generate the person's will.

The chapter, "Been Believing in Nothing: Existentialism in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction," looks at O'Connor's "Good Country People" and identifies existential themes and characters within the story from the perspective of Heidegger and Dostoevsky. The character Hulga, embodies existential nihilism. Hulga mostly lives in her own mind and forgets her physical body. The story emphasizes a metaphysical presence rather than an absence. Suffering plays a role in changing Hulga's ideas of the world, through being deceived, she is at the beginning of possible transformation of her thinking which may lead to transforming her will.

O'Connor's stories are anything but comfortable. She reveals the uncomfortability of encountering grace, something other; the person will choose to participate and be transformed or to violently reject that being. The encounter is jarring and uncomfortable, but can be life-changing. The key to deciphering O'Connor's work is through the idea of the anagogical. The ideas of grace and suffering and purgation as regenerative run throughout her stories. Incarnational theology is the counter to existential nihilism. O'Connor draws large, startling figures employing the shocking catalyst of grace that presents an opportunity to transform her characters, who are really us in the context of short story form. There are no simple, easy answers; life is not a mystery to be solved, but a mystery to be lived. The grace of transformation is not comfy, but the end result may be joy after the long, arduous journey. Michael Bruner sums her fiction well, "God's beauty shocks, terrorizes, and offends; God's goodness ruins, defeats, and destroys; and God's truth burns... all for the sake of redemption, both for her characters as

well as for her readers.”³⁴ O’Conner says, “the kingdom of heaven has to be taken by violence, or not at all. You have to push as hard as the age that pushes against you.”³⁵

³⁴ Michael Bruner, *A Subversive Gospel Flannery O’Connor and the Reimagining of Beauty, Goodness and Truth*, (IVP Academic, 2017), 218.

³⁵*The Habit of Being*, 229.

THE SHOCK OF GRACE IN FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S FICTION

I will argue in this paper: O'Connor's work is not easy to interpret; grace goes unnoticed unless the reader is looking for it. Her often violent encounters are not meaningless or for the sheer act of violence, but a wakeup call to grace, which changes a character (and possibly the reader).

There can be no grace if there is no sin or fallenness. O'Connor says in a letter to Cecil Dawkins, "The Liberal approach is that man has never fallen, never incurred guilt, and is ultimately perfectible by his own efforts. Therefore, evil in this light is a problem of better housing, sanitation, health, etc. and all mysteries will eventually be cleared up."³⁶ "O'Connor used violence to convey her vision because she knew that the violence of rejection in the modern world demands an equal violence of redemption—man needs to be 'struck' by mercy; God must overpower him. 'In a corrupt world,' O'Connor is saying, 'redemption is possible only through an extreme act, an act of absolute, irrevocable sacrifice.'"³⁷ In a letter to her friend known as "A," O'Connor says, "This notion that grace is healing omits the fact that before it heals, it cuts with the sword Christ said he came to bring."³⁸

O'Connor uses startling characters and imagery to wake the reader to grace. Her character's at times show a person of great vice or of one realizing their vices (because they were previously blind or not "self-aware") and are shocked by a violent or startling event to wake them up and then hopefully turn to follow virtue and potentially grace.³⁹ O'Connor says, "I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them

³⁶ Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), 302-303.

³⁷ Thelma, J. Shinn, "Flannery O'Connor and the Violence of Grace," *Contemporary Literature*, 9, 1 (Winter, 1968), 58-59.

³⁸ *The Habit of Being*, 411.

³⁹ or turn toward grace in the sense that Kierkegaard talks about faith being the implement to become the religious self—the opposite of sin is faith not virtue see Kierkegaard *Sickness Unto Death*, 82

to accept their moment of grace.”⁴⁰ Grace is the implement waking the characters to the reality of their own sin and to a higher being that may lead toward a conversion.⁴¹ In a letter O’Connor wrote to her friend “A,” she says, “It seems to me that all good stories are about conversion,⁴² about character’s changing. ... The action of grace changes a character. ... All you can do with grace is to show that it is changing the character. ... All my stories are about the action of grace on a character who is not very willing to support it, but most people think of these stories as hard, hopeless, brutal, etc.”⁴³ When one opens oneself to the divine, to grace, there is a vulnerability: it is an encounter that is terrifying as well as life-changing. O’Connor says, “All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful.”⁴⁴ The characters in her stories, as well as the reader of her stories, will respond to grace either in accepting or shunning it in their lives. Grace is also mysterious and not always logical or formulaic, additionally, it is a scandal, usually including an element of suffering.

What is grace? According to Augustine in Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica*,
“operating grace is faith that worketh by charity.”⁴⁵

Gratia in Aquinas’s use is an analogical notion with many nuances. In its widest sense, gratia denotes a freely given quality that renders the recipient pleasing. In a more restricted sense, gratia denotes the auxilium of the First Mover, whether due to nature or above nature, that is, natural (every motion proportionate to the nature of a being), preternatural (extraordinary strengthening, extension, or protection of natural capacities), or supernatural (for example, miracles in the strictest sense). Finally, in its most proper sense..., gratia denotes a strictly supernatural gift of

⁴⁰ Flannery O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), 112.

⁴¹ See “Parker’s Back,” “The Displaced Person,” *The Violent Bear It Away*

⁴² In another letter to “A” she explains conversion, “I don’t think of conversion as being once and for all and that’s that. I think once the process is begun and continues that you are continually turning inward toward God and away from your own egocentricity and that you have to see this selfish side of yourself in order to turn away from it.” *Habit of Being*, 430.

⁴³ *The Habit of Being*, 275.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 307.

⁴⁵ Thomas, Aquinas, Translated by Father of the English Dominican Province, *Summa Theologica*, 2nd ed., 1920, Article 3, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/2110.htm>. Date of access: 3/18/20.

God to the rational creature for the purpose of salvation, divinization, and eventual union of the rational creature with God.⁴⁶

In other words, grace comes from God who is above or outside of nature and moves the will (by one's response) of a human being to turn toward God in divine love for the Creator or First Mover and subsequently enacting charity toward other human beings. Grace, according to Thomas Aquinas, is needed for conversion (which is also a deeper drawing toward God), to take a leap of faith in becoming the religious self.⁴⁷ Grace is incarnational. What I mean is that if God entered human history in the form of Jesus Christ, then grace is actually Christ himself acting in the world. In the teaching of the incarnation, the sacraments are what enact grace within the world currently, by or with the Holy Spirit.⁴⁸ O'Connor explains, "Catholics believe that all creation is good and that evil is the wrong use of good and that without Grace we use it wrong most of the time. ... As to natural Grace, we have to take that the way it comes—through nature. In any case, it operates surrounded by evil."⁴⁹

In an article on Nature and Grace, Peter Kalkavage uses the example of Dante's image of Beatrice exemplifying Aquinas's understanding of grace. He says, "Beatrice incarnates the unity of nature and grace, of reason and faith. Her physical beauty, most evident in her eyes and smile, makes the grace of God stunningly *visible*."⁵⁰ This is an example of divine grace "rendering the

⁴⁶ Reinhard Hutter, "Grace and Charity. Participation in the Divine Nature and Union with God: The Surpassing Contemporary Significance of Thomas Aquinas's Doctrine of Divinization," *Espiritu: cuadernos del Instituto Filosófico de Balmesiana*, 65, 151 (January 2016), 179.

⁴⁷ See Kierkegaard's *Sickness Unto Death*

⁴⁸ To further elucidate, Gerard Manly Hopkins speaks of inscape, which is related to incarnational teaching that God is present in all things (see Colossians 3:11). Grace changes one's will and how the person sees through material things which subsequently transforms one's mind and body because these are united, not separate.

⁴⁹ Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), 144.

⁵⁰ Peter Kalkavage, "On Nature and Grace: The Role of Reason in the Life of Faith." *The Imaginative Conservative*, <https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2014/08/nature-grace-role-reason-life-faith.html>, Date of access: 3/18/20.

recipient pleasing,” but O’Connor intends to have grace shine through the grotesque,⁵¹ through the everyday, natural world. Grace is the divine acting and revealed through nature, which includes human beings, whether in visible beauty like that of Beatrice⁵² or through the grotesque. The supernatural becomes a marriage or melding with nature in the incarnation. The Christian faith is an incarnate faith in that the paradox of a transcendent God is also intimate and working within the cosmos and natural world. This view of grace is present within O’Connor’s stories. She says, “It is possible to know how to be one [a good man]. God became man partly in order to teach us, but it is impossible to be one without the help of grace.”⁵³

O’Connor does not narrate grace cheaply.⁵⁴ She is not sentimental in her writing. She will knock you in the face, as though the book is thrown at you like the character Mrs. Turpin in “Revelation” to wake her readers to the reality of grace that transforms the self. It is a call to respond to grace; accepting or rejecting. She doesn’t tell nice little stories, but startling stories that spark interest and have the potential to change the reader. Don’t we as readers, as human beings, need an event or person to shock us out of our stupor to live a better life, a life that is fulfilling and virtuous? A life that aims for the good? “O’Connor often referred to the ‘cost’ of Christianity and of how faith and obedience cannot be easy things if they are to be of any lasting

⁵¹ From: Courtenay Dudek, “Caravaggio and O’Connor on the Grotesque,” in author’s possession, term paper, Hood College, 2019. “The way I use the word grotesque for Caravaggio and O’Connor is thus: ‘The grotesque is a descent into the concrete, the material. It is not ashamed to wade through sewage and frog spit to find poetry. It embraces the unwashed body of the world without fastidiousness. [It] celebrates the material world—but without romanticizing it. Its subjects include the odds and end of life’ (Di Renzo 7). Caravaggio uses light to break upon darkness; a spotlight on one scene of conversion or calling. Flannery O’Connor used shocking moments like a spotlight breaking upon a person’s hypocrisy and igniting a character’s vision toward a sacramental inbreaking of grace, like light breaking upon darkness, revealing our humanity and the incarnate God who works through what we call grotesque material things.” quote above: Anthony Di Renzo, *American Gargoyles Flannery O’Connor and the Medieval Grotesque*, (Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), 7.

⁵² It must be noted that Beatrice is in the context of Paradise, so looking forward to the beatific vision and the resurrection of the body which may be different or more radiant in the context of eternity.

⁵³ *The Habit of Being*, 147.

⁵⁴ Rachel Toombs, “Almost Imperceptible Intrusions of Grace: On Flannery O’Connor’s Fiction and Readerly Entanglement,” *The Heythrop Journal*, LXII (2021), 904.

value. That high spiritual realities are manifested in low material things ('grace through nature'); that life of the prophet and Christian believer is costly and often fatal; and that God's mercy and grace are most intimately expressed in the form of mysterious and difficult, even foolish truths."⁵⁵ Bruner, here, is referring to O'Connor's novel *The Violent Bear It Away* and more specifically to Tarwater, the main character who seeks to deny Christ, but through purgatorial events, the "terrible speed of mercy," Tarwater is redeemed by an extreme event, which happens to most of her characters. O'Connor says, "What people don't realize is how much religion costs. They think faith is a big electric blanket, when of course it is the cross."⁵⁶

These extreme acts of redemption through grace are exemplified in several of O'Connor's stories. In the short story "The Comforts of Home," the agent of grace is Thomas's⁵⁷ mother who takes in a girl (Star) who is described as a reprobate, titled a nymphomaniac in the story. Thomas is the reasonable one who sees Star for who she is. He recognizes her as a troubled girl, calling her a "moral moron." Thomas compares the girl to the devil and wants his mother to see that Star is taking advantage of his mother. "Had she been in any degree intellectual, he could have proved to her from the early Christian history that no excess of virtue is justified, that a moderation of good produces likewise a moderation in evil. ... But when virtue got out of hand with her ... a sense of devils grew upon him..."⁵⁸ His mother will take in a troubled person without question. She has compassion, but may lack another virtue (such as wisdom) to notice a possible charlatan. Thomas is the voice of reason, a virtue, in his mother's life. He gets angry for her that she (Star) is taking advantage of her. Thomas tells her (his

⁵⁵ Michael Bruner, 48.

⁵⁶ *The Habit of Being*, 354.

⁵⁷ The name "Thomas" could be referring to Thomas Aquinas or Thomas More, a riff on reason and revelation and humanism (in the case of Thomas More).

⁵⁸ Flannery, O'Connor, "The Comforts of Home," *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1993), 119.

mother) that she is not logical.⁵⁹ At times, grace is not logical. (The mother admits knowing that the girl (Star) is taking advantage.)

In the Christian tradition, there are many instances in the gospel where Christ eats with, spends time with, has compassion on, calls to follow him: sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors, the reprobate of the culture. The Samaritan woman at the well who has had five husbands and lives with one who isn't her husband, Christ spoke to and changed her life. The encounter with Grace himself transformed her. This is the scandal of the gospel. "The Comforts of Home" speaks of this scandal in that logic and virtue can be limited. Grace reaches those who are listening, who are looking for it. At times, the so-called righteous and reasonable and virtuous are blind to grace.

Thomas, the cynical son, hears the pleas of the "slut", as he calls her, of killing herself as crying wolf, which could be seen as an act of a charlatan or an abuser. His mother refuses to dismiss the girl, even in the event of her attempting suicide. Thomas decides to bring her to the hospital and just leave her there. He just wants to get rid of her, not have anything to do with the girl, give her to someone else to deal with her. His mother sees the worth in the girl and will do whatever she can to help her.⁶⁰ In some sense, this could be looked at as the tension between reason and grace or reason and revelation—what one is called to do.

At the end of the story, Thomas plants a gun in the girl's purse as though an evil whisper persuades him to do so and is caught. Thomas becomes the demonic, defiant self and fires the gun, shooting his mother by accident (intending to kill the girl or at least frighten her, the ending

⁵⁹ "The Comforts of Home," 127.

⁶⁰ This could be seen as what Kierkegaard says about an admirer versus an imitator. Instead of the mother paying lip service to Star, she is living out what it means to care for and love someone else.

is left to interpretation). The girl and Thomas are over her body “the killer and the slut were about to collapse into each other’s arms.”⁶¹ This was the “moment of grace” as O’Connor called it. The moment of grace is the realization that the one woman who showed divine love through grace was now dead; the two who hated each other come to this realization and embrace one another and potentially lament together. The absolute act of sacrificial love in this story is an extreme, possibly unrealistic example, which some will see as an abusive relationship. O’Connor tends to use startling, extreme scenarios in order to wake the reader into thinking about deeper mysteries of this life: the limits of reason and the extremity of sacrificial love with its illogical ways that may strike a person to know something divine (love or grace). Sometimes our ugliness can rear its head in our reasonableness, which can manifest as coldness of heart or lack of love all together. On the other hand, the ugliness of vice is present and obvious in Star, “blessed are the freaks ... who at least have sense enough not to put any faith in their own respectability or virtue or talents.”⁶² Thomas’s love grew cold in his logic and reason; it was insidiously brewing within him; whereas, Star’s obvious sin was apparent to all, yet open to grace.

Violence unhinges a person, vice unhinges. Thomas, thinking he is reasonable and virtuous to get the “slut” out of his mother’s life is the man with good intentions, but limited sight. Thomas is the logical positivist in the story. His mother is the agent of grace and shows us as Joseph Pearce says, “... that love is inseparable from suffering. It is inseparable from the self-sacrifice demanded in laying down our lives for the beloved.”⁶³ In Thomas’s obsession to do what is right and logical (in his finite view), he ends up thinking evil of the girl, planting the gun,

⁶¹ Ibid., 142.

⁶² Jonathan, Rogers, *The Terrible Speed of Mercy*, (Thomas Nelson, 2012), xviii.

⁶³ Joseph, Pearce, “The Violent Wisdom of Flannery O’Connor,” *The Imaginative Conservative*, <https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2016/02/the-violent-wisdom-of-flannery-oconnor.html>, Date of Access: 3/20/2020.

and finally being the killer of his own mother. His sin is insidious, and yet grace operates surrounded by evil.

Where is the grace in this story? His mother's attitude and love for the girl is grace present. The end of the story seems to show a moment of grace as well, "the killer and the slut were about to collapse into each other's arms." The one woman who cared unconditionally for the son and the girl was no longer present. The mother lays down her life for the beloved, and the two seem to recognize this at the very end. O'Connor leaves it open as to whether the shock will give the characters opportunity to change their ways or to go on in despair and bitterness.

"In place of an all-knowing narrator, readers are left to piece together fragmented scenes of violence ... [asking] 'Is God here? Is this how God's grace could ... work?'"⁶⁴ O'Connor talks about narrating fiction: "...all good stories are about conversion, about a character changing ... The action of grace changes a character" the grace often appears, "hard, hopeless, brutal, etc."⁶⁵ "O'Connor renders grace without the sentimental tinge that undercuts so many artistic depictions of graced moments. She depicts grace as an oft unwelcome visitor in her characters' selfish pursuits."⁶⁶ Thomas veils protecting his mother from being taken advantage of in the vice of selfishness and disregard of another human being, although he calls it virtue. It takes the death⁶⁷ of his mother to have his eyes (and Star's) opened to grace.

Why did O'Connor write in this way? Critics have called her writing Southern Gothic or Grotesque.⁶⁸ Michael Bruner has a clearer understanding of what her work is,

⁶⁴ Toombs, 901.

⁶⁵ Flannery, O'Connor, "Essays and Letters," *Collected Works*, (The Library of America 39, 1988), 1067.

⁶⁶ Toombs, 902.

⁶⁷ I do not mean that violence is grace or that the action of murder is grace. But in the event of such horror, grace will show itself, at least in Flannery's fiction. It operates surrounded by evil, as O'Connor put it.

⁶⁸ Shinn, 235.

O'Connor's central theological convictions, namely, that redemption is hard because life is hard, and life is hard because we are sinners who resist redemption with every fiber of our being, preferring the easy stroll to the arduous pilgrimage, a pilgrimage fraught with dragons at the side of the road waiting to devour us. ...the farcical energy in her stories and the torn and ragged terrain of her fictional world were not fed by, or created out of, a sublimated anger but were, ...wrought from a clear vision of the exacting severity of God's divine love ... it is a shadow of grace they (her characters) walk in.... To put it another way, O'Connor's stories are a fictional rendering of 'the terrible speed of mercy.'"⁶⁹

O'Connor called her fiction literal rather than grotesque.⁷⁰ The terrible speed of mercy Bruner refers to is from Baron von Hugel who wrote on Christian mysticism. O'Connor was influenced by his writings and understood grace acting upon a person in an almost violent, unsettling way in order to wake the person to the reality of goodness. Grace acts as a purgatorial refiner's fire. "What he means by the speed of mercy is that mercy burns up what we are attached to, the word is a burning word to burn you clean."⁷¹ As Bob Dowell puts it, "...[her] fiction is ... concerned with man's life-and-death spiritual struggle. The protagonist, rebelling against belief, forces a crisis that reveals to him his haughty and willful misconception of reality, at which time he experiences ... his 'moment of grace.'" And this comes at a great price.⁷² Mercy is something that is undeserved. Many of O'Connor's characters are despicable and don't deserve redemption, but the speed of mercy is divine grace prompting the person to turn toward the source of mercy and grace once again.

In O'Connor's story, "A Good Man is Hard to Find", the Misfit commits himself to evil. The grandmother only had a superficial commitment to the good, but just before she is shot by

⁶⁹ Michael Bruner, *A Subversive Gospel: Flannery O'Connor and the Reimagining of Beauty, Goodness, and Truth*. (Downers Grove, IL, IVP Academic, 2017), 73.

⁷⁰ *Mystery and Manners*, 113.

⁷¹ Michael Bruner, 41. This is from a letter O'Connor wrote to her friends the Cheneys. She is referring to von Hugel.

⁷² Bob Dowell, "The Moment of Grace in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor," *College English*, 27, 3, (Dec. 1965), 236.

the Misfit, she recognizes him as a child of God, as one who is made in the imago dei. O'Connor explains this was her moment of grace. O'Connor says referring to this story,

Grace, to the Catholic way of thinking, can and does use as its medium the imperfect, purely human, and even hypocritical. Cutting yourself off from Grace is a very decided matter, requiring a real choice, act of will, and affecting the very ground of the soul. The Misfit is touched by Grace that comes through the old lady when she recognizes him as her child, as she has been touched by the Grace that comes through him in his particular suffering. His shooting her is a recoil, a horror at her humanness, but after he has done it and cleaned his glasses, the Grace has worked in him and he pronounces his judgment: she would have been a good woman if he had been there every moment of her life.⁷³

O'Connor's understanding of God is one "you cannot control, one who was neither respectable nor tame. This was a ferocious deity to match O'Connor's ferocious stories."⁷⁴ Yet, O'Connor never loses sight that each person is a created being "precious to his Creator."⁷⁵ When the moment of grace strikes, it is hoped the character will turn toward goodness once again.

Thelma Shinn in her article, "Flannery O'Connor and the Violence of Grace," deems the criminals and prophets in O'Connor's stories closer to salvation because they have a battle within themselves, a "belief or disbelief in Christ."⁷⁶ Whereas those who only use reason alone (without faith), are potentially further from grace. As in the example of "The Comforts of Home," Thomas is the reasonable ethical self, doing what seems the right thing. A good example of the prophet who is battling within himself is Haze Motes in O'Connor's first novel *Wise Blood*. He wants to start the church of Christ without Christ. His aim is to deny the reality of God in the world, denying the reality of grace. In the case of this novel, grace is seen through a time of suffering or isolation, coming to the end of oneself. His defiance to deny Christ is squashed in the end through a sickness. At the end of the novel, Haze comes near that which he wanted to

⁷³ *The Habit of Being*, 389.

⁷⁴ Bruner, 76.

⁷⁵ Dowell, 238.

⁷⁶ Shinn, 66.

deny, through suffering. He is driven back to Christ by a violent act (blinding himself), symbolic that he was blind to the reality of grace present in all things.

“The Lame Shall Enter First” is a good example of the self-righteous person wanting to save a local wretch named Johnson. Johnson rebukes Sheppard (the protagonist of the story). Sheppard, thinking he is good and righteous to help the boy, neglects his own son Norton. O’Connor represents Sheppard as the ethical self, denying the reality of Christ. Johnson refuses Sheppard’s help telling him, “Satan has you in his power.”⁷⁷ Sheppard tries to comfort himself, “‘I have done nothing to reproach myself with,’ he began again. ‘I did more for him than I did for my own child.’”⁷⁸

Slowly his face drained of color. It became almost grey beneath the white halo of his hair. The sentence echoed in his mind, each syllable like a dull blow. His mouth twisted and he closed his eyes against the revelation. Norton’s face rose before him, empty, forlorn, his left eye listing almost imperceptibly toward the outer rim as if it could not bear a full view of grief. His heart constricted with a repulsion for himself so clear and intense that he gasped for breath. He had stuffed his own emptiness with good works like a glutton. He had ignored his own child to feed his own vision of himself. He saw the clear-eyed Devil, the sounder of hearts, leering at him from the eyes of Johnson. His image of himself shriveled until everything was black before him. ...

He saw Norton at the telescope, all back and ears, saw his arm shoot up and wave frantically. A rush of agonizing love for the child rushed over him like a transfusion of life. The little boy’s face appeared to him transformed; the image of his salvation; all light. ... He would make everything up to him. He would never let him suffer again. He would be mother and father. He jumped up and ran to his room, to kiss him, to tell him that he loved him, that he would never fail him again.⁷⁹

Sheppard finds his son dead in the attic where Norton would look through the telescope where he could see his mom (who had died) in heaven. Norton was neglected by his own father. Johnson became Sheppard’s project and main focus who needed help, but Sheppard’s charge was to first care for and love his own son. If I go by Kierkegaard’s structure of self, first the self must be in right relation to God and then to others (so God first, then family, then others). Sheppard saw his

⁷⁷ O’Connor, “The Lame Shall Enter First,” 189.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 189-190.

own goodness in trying to help a wretch on the street, but his main charge was his own son. O'Connor uses Johnson to point out that Sheppard is blind to the idea of who God is and what his virtue and goodness ought to be aimed toward. The moment of grace is the revelation that Sheppard's main focus was to love his own son and not Johnson. Johnson acts as the disturbed prophet, but Sheppard would not listen to him. Sheppard has the moment of grace and realization that his neglect of his own son is terrible and that he needs to love and care for his son, but too late, there was a cost to Sheppard's neglect. Again, the story's ending is open-ended. O'Connor keeps it open-ended to keep an element of mystery. We don't know the ending of our own life nor of other's. We do not know how grace will work in someone's life. We are finite and do not know. The hope is that the character will turn toward the Creator as Dowell said, but we do not know for certain. Thelma Shinn says,

Sheppard ... is granted a revelation and a chance to suffer for his sins and thus to attain redemption.... He recognizes his own sin and insignificance. ... [The end] is not meaningless violence.... Sheppard's vision of Norton was correct—the boy was transformed; he was all light. He had gone to find his mother. ...He was also the image of Sheppard's salvation. Now that Sheppard has recognized both his love for his son and his own guilt, he was prepared to suffer, to purge his soul for ... redemption.⁸⁰

This is a possible interpretation of this story in the sense of purgation occurring in one's lifetime here on earth. Nonetheless, the grace of God is mysterious and does not always work in formulaic patterns. God, in O'Connor's view, is not one to be controlled or fully understood—a God who is understood is less than yourself.⁸¹ There are many mysteries in this life, especially the grace God enacts upon the world (nature) and each human being. It seems in O'Connor's view that God is not the God of sentimentalism and that grace is not a sentimental gauze of comfort.

⁸⁰ Shinn, 72-73.

⁸¹ *The Habit of Being*, 354.

O'Connor's work is not easy to interpret; grace goes unnoticed unless the reader is looking for it. Her often violent encounters are not meaningless or for the sheer act of violence, but a wakeup call to grace, which changes a character (and potentially the reader). Her stories assist the reader to become self-reflective and ponder her work with no easy or simple answers. O'Connor's stories open the reader to the reality of mystery in the enactment of grace in the world and in each human being.

In "The Comforts of Home," we see Thomas the logical, ethical person who sees Star as a problem and charlatan. He wishes to protect his mother from her at his own peril. The final embrace after the violent scene is the moment of grace. In "The Lame Shall Enter First," we see Sheppard trying to help a wretch living on the street, but the wretch, Johnson, makes Sheppard aware he doesn't need help and that Sheppard is neglecting who truly matters—his own son, Norton. Sheppard has a revelation to love his own son, but at a terrible cost. Thomas and Sheppard are the logical, secular positivists who have no need for God or grace, yet grace hits as hard against them as their worldview hits against Christianity.

O'Connor was accused of writing as a nihilist, which she rejected; she had a strong faith.⁸² Her work is deeply infused with Catholic theology and the idea of grace. Her God is no grandfather in the sky letting people do whatever they want as long as they are nice. Her God is not to be controlled or completely understood. The "twentieth-century America[n] ... assumption is that religious matters must be discussed in gentle and decorous ways."⁸³ In O'Connor's case, she does not write in a gentle or decorous way. She shocks her readers to the reality of grace with an equal violence of that of a hard reality. "When O'Connor follows the example of the Old

⁸² *Mystery and Manners*, 32.

⁸³ Bruner, 76.

Testament prophets and presents the Lord's message in harsh and violent images, she restores life and interest to religious literature."⁸⁴

Divine grace is present in nature and through the acts of human beings. Grace is revealed even through the harsh and difficult reality of unsettling events, violent events, harsh words, and harsh and difficult people. Grace is also seen in and heard in beautiful things and kind words and words of wisdom, but this is not O'Connor's main drive. She wanted to show grace through the lens that many saw the world, a response to a nihilistic view; the reality that life is harsh, yet grace shines through even that. It is a purgatorial grace. "God's love burns, his truth makes fools of us all, and the speed of his mercy knocks us down."

⁸⁴ Ibid.

PURGATION AND THE ANAGOGICAL IN FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S "THE DISPLACED PERSON" AND "REVELATION"

The medieval interpreter of scripture had a four-fold approach: the historical/literal, allegorical, moral or tropological, and the anagogical. O'Connor's works can be approached in this manner, especially the anagogical approach. O'Connor explains, "The kind of vision the fiction writer needs ... to increase the meaning of [the] story is called anagogical vision, ... that is the kind of vision that is able to see different levels of reality in one image or one situation."⁸⁵ She continues explaining the anagogical "had to do with the Divine life and our participation in it.... It was also an attitude toward all of creation, and a way of reading nature which included most possibilities...."⁸⁶ There is an emphasis and importance of the body and not only the mind and "spiritual" within medieval thought. I will introduce her short story "Revelation" anagogically, setting the tone of the place of suffering to *purgate* the conscience and see the world aright, specifically human beings who have otherwise been disenfranchised in Mrs. Turpin's mind and way of life. I will explore her novella "The Displaced Person" anagogically as well, while also revealing the significance of the disenfranchised in this particular story. The idea of the purgatorial vision will be in light of Catherine of Genoa, which will unlock how suffering is not suffering for its own sake, but that suffering occurs in life no matter who you are, and suffering can change, even transform one's way of seeing (and thinking) the good, which is connected to grace and an act of love given. Suffering can be a journey toward the death of ego and a re-ordering toward humility.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Flannery O'Connor, "The Nature and Aim of Fiction," *Mystery and Manners*, (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969), 72.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁸⁷ See Dante's Purgatory

An overarching theme within O'Connor's works is the complex figure of the human being, but also, "she does not, 'write of an insane world peopled by monsters and submen,'" as some critics have said of her work. O'Connor's stories show that "even the most damaged sinners long for transcendence whether they know it or not" and that transcendence will be made present, usually in a shocking and startling manner. O'Connor also presents freaks but with the reality that there is a "possibility that her lame will walk again and her maimed will be made whole."⁸⁸ In a way, O'Connor is a defender of the so-called "freak." She is the defender in the same way that the gospels defend the disenfranchised and freaks, in that we all have some kind of deformity within us, something not quite right, yet also playing with the idea that the undesirable and freaks are possibly more aware of grace and transcendence than those who claim to be "righteous." O'Connor's works have been misunderstood as Kafkaesque, and critics called her a "hillbilly nihilist," but she has said, herself, she is a "hillbilly Thomist."⁸⁹ She read Thomas Aquinas each night, but also read philosophy, theology, and literary criticism on a regular basis.⁹⁰

The anagogical symbol I will explore in "The Displaced Person" and in "Revelation" is the purgative suffering that her characters go through. In "Revelation" there is an acute purgation, whereas, in "The Displaced Person" it is over a long period of time. Her characters are harmed, but are never completely out of the scope of redemption or grace, although, most of the time, she leaves this open-ended, creating a mystery—since our story is not complete either (always drawing back upon the reader to relate and examine the self in light of her characters). O'Connor says, "There is a moment in every great story in which the presence of grace can be

⁸⁸ Jonathan Rogers, *The Terrible Speed of Mercy A Spiritual Biography of Flannery O'Connor*, (Thomas Nelson, 2012), 62.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁹⁰ She also corresponded with literary critics, writers, editors, theologians, and professors on a regular basis.

felt as it waits to be accepted or rejected, even though the reader may not recognize this moment.”⁹¹

Mrs. Turpin’s vision at the end of “Revelation” is the key to the purgative idea of changing one’s perception of human beings and one’s conscience toward others whom we directly encounter.

There was a purple streak in the sky, cutting through a field of crimson and leading, like an extension of the highway, into the descending dusk. ... A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black n----- in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. ... Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.⁹²

Mrs. Turpin once considered herself better than other classes of people as she tells of her superiority at the beginning of the story. This is one of the clearer and more vivid examples of O’Connor’s purgative visions. This vision also reveals the upside down world and scandal of the gospels—the first shall be last and the last first.

What is the purgative vision O’Connor is drawing from? It stems from the idea of suffering being an agent of cleansing, fire a symbol of purification, but it is not punishment per se, after all, in Dante’s Purgatory, it is the ante-room of heaven, envisioned as a mountain. It is a movement upward. It has been mistaken that suffering is to be sought almost masochistically, but suffering in life is a certainty no matter who you are. C. S. Lewis said, “Suffering is not a good in itself. What is good in any painful experience is, for the sufferer, submission to the will of God,

⁹¹ Flannery, O’Connor, “On Her Own Work,” *Mystery and Manners*, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), 118.

⁹² Flannery O’Connor, “Revelation,” *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965), 217-218.

and, for the spectator, the compassion aroused and the acts of mercy to which it leads.”⁹³ He continues, referring to Aquinas and Aristotle,

that it [suffering] was a thing not good in itself; but a thing which might have a certain goodness in particular circumstances. If evil is present, pain at recognition of the evil, being a kind of knowledge, is relatively good; for the alternative is that the soul should be ignorant of the evil, or ignorant that the evil is contrary to its nature. ... The demand that God should forgive such a man while he remains what he is, is based on a confusion between condoning and forgiving. To condone an evil is simply to ignore it, to treat it as if it were good. ... A man who admits no guilt can accept no forgiveness.⁹⁴

In other words, the change in one’s perspective of reality and of human beings takes suffering (a suffering with) in some cases. Education to be aware of wrong ways of thinking or viewing the world can only do so much. If a person is indifferent to the value of each human being, then it is a failure in that person viewing the world. In many cases, suffering some kind of jarring violent act, such as a girl reading a book on human development and throwing it at Mrs. Turpin and tackling her and calling her a “warthog from hell,”⁹⁵ because of Mrs. Turpin’s spoken prejudices of human beings and her illusion of superiority, will jar a person from their illusion of their own sense of nothing being out of order or denial of a sin. In “The Displaced Person,” a change in conscience requires a death and sickness for Mrs. McIntyre to begin to change her view. When one is sick, the person has no control and is subject to stillness and reflection, possibly resulting in a change of perception, at times solitude can lead to some type of revelation.

Susan Srigley tells us that O’Connor, in a letter to Betty Hester, names Mrs. Turpin’s vision as a “purgatorial vision.” She has a realization, “a revelation of self-knowledge; it is a

⁹³ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, (Harper Collins, 1996), 110.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 123-124. Thomas Aquinas views sin in three ways: ignorance, the passions (not that passions are bad or evil, but can be lesser goods if out of order i.e. adultery considered choosing a lesser good), or malice/ having a bad will. Habituation may be a remedy, the catalyst being grace.

⁹⁵ Flannery, O’Connor, “Revelation,” 207.

purgatorial cleansing and transformation of Ruby Turpin.” It is a “spiritual re-ordering.”⁹⁶ Mrs. Turpin has her idea of the hierarchy of the classes, which is her own construction (possibly her culture’s construction). For example, Mrs. Turpin is talking to a “white trash woman” (in her view), the debate of how “black” people should go back to Africa, but Mrs. Turpin counters with, “Noo... they’re going to stay here where they can go to New York and marry white folks and improve their color. That’s what they all want to do, every one of them, improve their color.”⁹⁷ She also thanks Jesus for not being white trash or poor or black, but if she could choose, she’d like to be herself but black.⁹⁸ She has an illusion about who she is, assuming she is a decent person with a good disposition, as though that is the highest virtue that exonerates her view of human beings. She sees herself at the top of the hierarchy because of her “Christian virtue” and her class and race. As Srigley points out, “her self-love distorts her vision of others.... Her love of her Christian virtue is a disordered form of love. Instead of loving God and others, she loves herself more than everything by priding herself on her goodness.”⁹⁹

Purgatory, in light of Catherine of Genoa, is not punishment, but a “realization of the order of love.”¹⁰⁰ If God is love and purgatory takes place in this life¹⁰¹ and if God’s love is like fire, then it is a love that consumes like the burning bush in the book of Exodus revealed to Moses on Mt. Sinai—it burned but was not destroyed. It is a fire that changes the nature of the person; transforms that person in the way one sees and thinks. It is “necessary to purify the

⁹⁶ Susan Srigley, “O’Connor and the Mystics: St. Catherine of Genoa’s Purgatorial Vision in ‘Revelation,’” *Flannery O’Connor Review* 2 (2003-2004), 40.

⁹⁷ Flannery, O’Connor, “Revelation,” 201.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁹⁹ Susan Srigley, 40.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ If purgatory is a reality after this life, then there is possibility of a continued cleansing that may be more acute potentially.

imperfect loves of human beings.”¹⁰² “Suffering is not due to God’s infliction of punishment but to the soul’s recognition of what it is and what it lacks in relation to God.”¹⁰³ Through Mrs. Turpin’s realization that she isn’t as wonderful as she thought, she argues with God and blames God for the girl calling her a “warthog from hell.” This is the realization that her inner self does not align with the goodness of God. Mrs. Turpin creates a hierarchy of who she wishes to love more than others and who to leave out. What God demands is a “turning away from the self” and instead to turn toward God. “Conversion [is] not... a singular event with a miraculous or permanent change of heart but as a series of turns.”¹⁰⁴ An aspect of purgation is a stripping away of our self-delusion of our superiority in relation to others. “The soul’s ascent, according to St. Catherine, is to be purified by a love that focuses on God and others more than the self.”¹⁰⁵

In the story, “The Displaced Person,” Mrs. McIntyre is similarly deluded in her relation toward others. The exception is that she does not see herself as righteous in her “Christian virtue,” but in her practical virtue of running her farm well and putting up with the “help” who causes her more of a headache than anything else. She does have a similar idea of hierarchy— her race being above others, but also her class being above her workers on the farm. She continuously complains about the workers on her farm and complains about running the farm and having a tight budget. She sees the Polish immigrant family doing very well for her, relating herself to the family as very capable, again mainly focusing on herself—that focus on self, which Srigley reminds us. “At last,” she said, “I’ve got somebody I can depend on. For years I’ve been

¹⁰² Ibid., 41.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 42.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 49.

fooling with sorry people. Poor white trash and n-----,” she muttered. “They’ve drained me dry.”¹⁰⁶

Mrs. McIntyre sees the Polish family as her salvation. ““That man is my salvation!” she said.”¹⁰⁷ She sees him as saving her farm and making it more efficient where she doesn’t have to waste so much money with her other workers. She sees practicality as her salvation. In some sense, she doesn’t exactly know what she is saying. Mr. Guizac, the Polish man, can be seen typologically as a Christ-figure. In a better sense, Mr. Guizac, especially his death, participates or is “initiated into the mystery of the cross” and emphasizing the importance of the body instead of the abstract.¹⁰⁸ He can be seen as one who shows Mrs. McIntyre of what a good person is like without flaunting virtue, but just being good and destroying any presuppositions of “Europeans” who might be capable of the holocaust.¹⁰⁹

(A little context within the story and time period: The priest of the community arranged for displaced Polish immigrants to work on Mrs. McIntyre’s farm. The context is the 1950s, after World War II, where most of Poland was destroyed by the Nazis and many were sent to America to work. Regina, O’Connor’s mother, owned a dairy farm and had Polish immigrants¹¹⁰ work on her farm for several months. O’Connor directly pulled from this experience in her life (since she

¹⁰⁶ Flannery O’Connor, “The Displaced Person,” *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, (Mariner Books, 1976), 219.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 220.

¹⁰⁸ Anthony Di Renzo, *American Gargoyles Flannery O’Connor and the Medieval Grotesque*, (Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), 41.

¹⁰⁹ In the story, there is a suspicion that because the family is from Poland, that they have also brought a sickness, the idea that there is something innately wrong with Europeans, in their thinking. That because of this “genetic” way of thinking, this is what caused the concentration camps and continual war, i.e. WWI and WWII. Flannery’s point here is that all human beings are afflicted with an error in thinking—all are capable of good, but also evil. She would call it original sin, as she writes about her first collection of short stories. In “The Displaced Person,” she demonstrates throughout the story that every character is deluded into thinking that their way and viewpoint is the correct way and viewpoint. They are blind to their own flaws and limitations and errors of how they see others, though.

¹¹⁰ Leonard M. Olschner, “Annotations on History and Society in Flannery O’Connor’s ‘The Displaced Person,’” in *The Flannery O’Connor Bulletin*, 16 (1987), 65. “Harry Truman, issued a directive that would facilitate admission of 42000 displaced persons to the US.” In 1950 400,000 displaced persons entered the US over a four-year period.

also lived on her mother's farm and wrote there), but added fictitious situations to write her story.)

The workers on the farm are very skeptical of the Polish immigrants and are concerned that they will be displaced themselves and be out of work. Mrs. Shortly, one of the workers on the farm describes her idea of those in Europe, [she]

recalled a newsreel she had seen once of a small room piled high with bodies of dead naked people all in a heap, their arms and legs tangled together, a head thrust in here, a head there, a foot, a knee, a part that should have been covered up sticking out, a hand raised clutching nothing. ... This was the kind of thing that was happening every day in Europe where they had not advanced as in this country, ... Mrs. Shortley had the sudden intuition that the Gobblehooks,¹¹¹ like rats with typhoid fleas, could have carried all those murderous ways over the water with them....¹¹²

She is very suspicious of these Eastern Europeans, as though they have some kind of inner sickness of mind that will contaminate America. She has the idea that "these people" will enact the same atrocities that occurred in Europe and poison America. She likens Europe to "the devil's experiment station."¹¹³ Mrs. Shortley sees herself as superior to the Polish, superior as an American who would never cause the holocaust. Mrs. Shortley is highly suspicious of the priest. In addition, she looks for any way to make meaning of her world, in her own way of understanding. She reads the Apocalypse and interprets it through her own twisted understanding of Europe and apparently Catholicism,

God save me! She cried silently, from the stinking power of Satan! And she started from that day to read her Bible with a new attention. She pored over the Apocalypse and began to quote the prophets and before long she had come to a deeper understanding of her existence. She saw plainly that the meaning of the world was a mystery that had been planned and she was not surprised to suspect that she had a special part in the plan because she was strong. She saw 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. Right now she felt that her business was to watch the priest. ... Here he was:

¹¹¹ She doesn't know how to pronounce the family's last name, Guizac, but also cannot fully understand their accent or language; but with this misunderstanding, further othering the Guizacs.

¹¹² Flannery O'Connor, "The Displaced Person," *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, (Mariner Books, 1976), 210.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 223.

Leading foreigners over in hordes to places that were not theirs, to cause disputes, to uproot n-----, to plant the Whore of Babylon in the midst of the righteous.¹¹⁴

This speaks of our prejudices of the unknown. It is Darwinian in the sense of the strong being the superior ones who see correctly and know the correct way of what is good and who is not to be trusted. The language speaks of the millennia of misinterpreting scriptures to our own agenda and our own ideas of who is supposed to be in the “inner circle” and who is to be excluded. Haven’t many of us done this throughout the history of the world and continue this way of thinking? Haven’t those in power done this, those not in power, those of different faiths and creeds and religions?

O’Connor, in her stories, is showing us our own prejudices toward other people. She is pointing out that we as human beings are capable of atrocities, but she also reminds us that little sins have more of an effect on others than we think. She calls this first volume of short stories (where “The Displaced Person” is published) a collection of stories about original sin. She points out the realization that we all have the capability of error in ways of thinking and seeing—she calls it original sin. She does not leave her stories there, though. She introduces moments of grace and conversion—that turning toward God.

Later in the story, Mr. Guizac wants to bring one of his cousins to America to marry one of the black workers on the farm. Mrs. McIntyre finds out and calls him a monster for trying to do such a thing. She demeans the black worker, but black people in general, “Maybe it can be done in Poland but it can’t be done here and you’ll have to stop. It’s all foolishness. That n----- don’t have a grain of sense and you’ll excite...”¹¹⁵ He thinks he is not allowed to do this because his cousin is sixteen and explains she was in the camp (concentration camp) for three years. He

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 228-229.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 247.

does not understand segregation in the south, the context is the 1950s. This is another example of the “innocence” but also the virtue and goodness of Mr. Guizac. He sees others as human beings, not as those who are to be demeaned or seen as less. Mrs. McIntyre continues, “I cannot understand how a man who calls himself a Christian... could bring a poor innocent girl over here and marry her to something like that. I cannot understand it. I cannot!”¹¹⁶ Mrs. McIntyre has the illusion of Christianity supporting the idea of segregation, which in some sects, historically, it did. She does not have the correct view of the worth of each person as being the image of God, as O’Connor would argue.

In the third part of the story, the priest is talking about Purgatory and Mrs. McIntyre has decided to let Mr. Guizac and his family go. The priest tries to convince her to keep the family. During this argument, the priest has somewhat of a vision,

The priest let his eyes wander toward the birds. They had reached the middle of the lawn. The cock stopped suddenly and curving his neck backwards, he raised his tail and spread it with a shimmering timbrous noise. Tiers of small pregnant suns floated in a green-gold haze over his head. The priest stood transfixed, his jaw slack. Mrs. McIntyre wondered where she had ever seen such an idiotic old man. “Christ will come like that!” he said in a loud gay voice and wiped his hand over his mouth and stood there, gaping. ...Christ in the conversation embarrassed her the way sex had her mother. “It is not my responsibility that Mr. Guizac has nowhere to go...”

The old man didn’t seem to hear her. ... “The Transfiguration,” he murmured. She had no idea what he was talking about. “Mr. Guizac didn’t have to come here in the first place.” ...

The old man smiled absently. “He came to redeem us.”¹¹⁷

This is an interesting exchange. Mrs. McIntyre seeks to fire the Guizac family from the farm, but the priest is transfixed by the peacock on the farm, seeing something that she cannot see. As she talks about the Guizacs, the priest is seeing the return of Christ and the transfiguration in the symbol of the peacock. It can be suggested that as he is speaking, the layers in the conversation

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 248.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 251-252.

are also pointing to the typology¹¹⁸ of Mr. Guizac as a symbol pointing toward a telos. The mystery of the unseen world breaking in upon the seen world in a family from Europe, slowly working on the hierarchical ideas of race and class and a purgation of conscience that will not strike Mrs. McIntyre until the end of the story. This is the idea that a symbol will point toward something other than itself even though the object is still what it is, yet points beyond itself, in this case toward Christ and an eschaton. At an earlier point in the story, the priest sees the peacock and says, “‘So beautiful,’ the priest said. ‘A tail full of suns,’ and he crept forward on tiptoe and looked down on the bird’s back where the polished gold and green design began. The peacock stood still as if he had just come down from some sun-drenched height to be a vision for them all.”¹¹⁹ The peacock is another example of the anagogical, a creature pointing toward something other than itself, an image of the divine within the story.

At the end of the story, Mr. and Mrs. Shortley had left the farm because they felt unwelcome since the Guizacs had arrived, their own prejudice exiling themselves from the farm. Mr. Shortley returns to the farm after his wife dies. He works to have Mrs. McIntyre continue to distrust the Guizacs. She again starts to see the Guizacs as extra, dehumanizing them. In the last pages of the story, Mr. Guizac is repairing a tractor and lies beneath the tractor to repair it. He is run over by a tractor and it is suggested that the other tenants on the farm let it happen, not stepping in to stop the tractor. Mrs. McIntyre happens upon it and witnesses the death and faints. It ends up that everyone leaves the farm and Mrs. McIntyre comes down with a nervous affliction and is bedridden and has a “colored” nurse come to take care of her. The only visitor is the priest who brings a bag of breadcrumbs for the peacock and speaks to Mrs. McIntyre. Earlier

¹¹⁸ Linda Munk in her article “Understanding Understatement: Biblical Typology and ‘The Displaced Person,’” published by Oxford University Press in *Literature and Theology*, vol. 2, 2 (September 1988), focuses on this idea.

¹¹⁹ “The Displaced Person,” 213.

in the story she says, “She knew what it was to struggle. People ought to have to struggle.”¹²⁰ She eats her own words at the end of the story. She knew what it was like to struggle with finances and keeping up the farm and being a widow, but she didn’t know what it was to suffer for no fault of her own as the Polish family has, yet go about their lives gratefully. At the end of the story, Mrs. McIntyre is bed-ridden and her only companion who sees her is the priest “explaining the doctrines of the Church.”¹²¹ She is in the posture of submission that Srigley talks about, the submission to the will of God, her will open to a transformation of the soul. “Change is to be the work not of man but of God. The last stage of love is the pure intense love of God alone.”¹²²

It seems this is the purgatorial love working on Mrs. McIntyre to humble her to the love of God and be transformed to the will of God. This story is not as blatant as “Revelation.” In that story, we see Mrs. Turpin begin to change her ideas of human beings and has a vision, and we assume she is humbled and changes. Whereas, Mrs. McIntyre has a long period of time evaluating if the Polish immigrants are trouble, deceived by the Shortley’s saying they have a darkness that will ruin her and the farm. It ends up, those who were already on the farm ruin things. The Guizacs, in many ways, are good and show her the goodness of people without an agenda or prejudices. Is her sickness, her suffering at the end of the story the beginning of Mrs. McIntyre’s conversion to turn toward God by the help of the priest’s teaching and company? Is this the way that the egoistic self begins its long destruction? Di Renzo says, “Her suffering connects her to a suffering humanity and to a suffering God. The Crucifixion is no longer a myth that she can take or leave. It is what is happening in her own flesh, in her own body.”¹²³

¹²⁰ Ibid., 242.

¹²¹ Ibid., 265.

¹²² Srigley, 42.

¹²³ Di Renzo, 41.

Purgatory is existential to her now, rather than abstract. “Like Dostoevski, O’Connor believes that her characters need to experience suffering firsthand if they are ever to become authentic in an unjust world. The pain of being mortal and vulnerable is the one thing that teaches them pity and humility.”¹²⁴ It is a spiritual re-ordering that Srigley reminds us about.

O’Connor reveals the anagogical purgatorial vision through her characters, the prejudices in the hearts of her characters, but also the violent grace and suffering that works to transform one’s way of thinking and seeing the world, but also transforming the person. Mrs. Turpin has a book thrown at her and is called a “warthog from hell” which gives her opportunity to reflect about herself and the way she sees the world. After some time, she has a vision which reveals to her that her place in the world is not paramount and even her virtue is not the highest or best way. Her self-love is revealed to her and something begins to change within her to see the world and each person having worth and worthy of respect and love. In “The Displaced Person,” it is a slow progression of change that isn’t concluded in the end; we as the reader are left with the hope that Mrs. McIntyre will change her perspective of human beings, which is really the hope for all of us reading the story. Mrs. Shortley reveals our flawed way of seeing the world through one’s own distorted scriptural interpretation that potentially blinds us and distorts our vision of reality. Those from another country, in this case Poland, are not inherently poisonous to a different culture, but may, in the long run, help us see the good in other cultures and peoples because of our commonality as human beings. “The Displaced Person” can also serve as a warning that we are all in danger of distorting our view of others (peoples and cultures), but also that all are guilty of faulty thinking and viewpoints. O’Connor does not leave us hanging though, she reminds us of grace that the flaws and freakyness within ourselves and others may not be

¹²⁴ Ibid.

permanent; we are capable of change in thinking and seeing, even if it is a slow pace over a lifetime. She also reminds us of the hope that flaws within the self will not be everlasting and suffering may be part of the process to change or be transformed. The goal is a re-ordering of our loves and movement toward humility, a death of ego.

BEEN BELIEVING IN NOTHING: EXISTENTIAL NIHILISM AND FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S RESPONSE

Some of O'Connor's stories seem to have existential ideas at the heart of the characters she creates. Upon close examination of O'Connor's story "Good Country People," the main character, Hulga, seems to personify an existential nihilism. O'Connor saw nihilism, not atheism, as a crucial problem within society as well as the church. Like Dostoevsky's underground man in *Notes from Underground*, some of O'Connor's characters see no value in morality or religious belief. The Underground Man asks for a third way, but doesn't get it. Dostoevsky, in a later work, and O'Connor offer this third way in their works—Christ, who is grace. Where Heidegger and Nietzsche saw the world through the lens that God is dead, some seeing this life as meaningless because of the horrors of the world, O'Connor seeks to push back on nihilism with similar ferocity in the grotesque and shock of her writing. Although some critics have called O'Connor's writing nihilistic (the hillbilly nihilist), they miss the point, she called herself a Christian realist and hillbilly Thomist. Even when existence seems to support there is no god, she includes the heavy and shocking movement of grace that enters each of her stories, although one has to look for the moment with eyes open. Redemption, for O'Connor, lies in the suffering of Jesus Christ, and in some ways our own suffering. In the world that O'Connor portrays, the hard-bitten, suffering of existence, the scandal is grace entering this uncertain existence. She is no sentimentalist or nihilist, but a realist. Similar to Dostoevsky's Underground Man, neither existential nihilism nor sentimentalism is the answer, but grace striking through is the third way offered.¹²⁵

¹²⁵ There is a letter Dostoevsky wrote that is referenced later that states some of the best parts were extracted by the censors—about Christ, the third way. I borrow this "third way" idea from Jessica Hooten Wilson.

Nietzsche and Heidegger's existentialism¹²⁶ is being in reality without God. The question posed: what is the purpose of this existence when we are alone? If God is dead, how should we live? Kierkegaard is a religious existentialist, who admits existence is troubling, anxiety-causing, where a melancholy persists and a present malaise. He understands the self being in three states: the aesthetic, ethical, and religious. The religious self is in relation with its Maker, therefore not in despair, whereas the other states of existence alone tend to be despairing (misrelated to God, on their own), according to an interpretation of his work *Sickness Unto Death*.

Dostoevsky in his *Brothers Karamazov* poses the idea, "if there is no God, all things are permitted." He too recognizes the religious self as a good state of existence. In a letter written to his brother, Dostoevsky says, "The censors are swine; they passed the parts where I ridiculed everything and sometimes blasphemed for show, but they cut the part where I deduced from all this the need for belief and for Christ."¹²⁷ Dostoevsky is referring to *Notes from Underground*. The Underground Man is suffering from a spiritual crisis and Dostoevsky asserts this is the central message to *Notes*. "Because he is unwilling or unable to commit himself to Christ, the Underground Man is trapped between the world of God and that of humanity."¹²⁸ The existentialist (whether atheist or theist) seeks to make sense of the world. This is part of the human condition. The existentialist seeks to make meaning of the world by one's individual

¹²⁶ Nietzsche is not a nihilist, it has been argued that he warns against nihilism, yet for the sake of this paper, the "nothingness" or absence of God (including Heidegger) is a contrast to a presence of God. Nonetheless, there was a prevailing nihilism within culture as O'Connor saw it, which led some to viewing the world or life as meaningless or having no consequences or, as Dostoevsky argued—then all is permitted if there is no God. pop culture examples could be 90s music, which I actually like—dialogue in the show *Succession* and some actions of the characters: if there is no God, we are just two people in a room that doesn't matter (paraphrase). This is referring to an affair Shiv is having in the first season, justification for bad faith or behavior. Yet, her complexity shows later in the season where she admits she may not be made for a monogamous marriage, and yet, loves her husband (whom she just married), which poses a contradiction in her thinking at that moment.

¹²⁷ Carol A. Flath, "Fear of Faith: The Hidden Religious Message of Notes from Underground," *The Slavic and East European Journal*, 37.4, (Winter 1993), 511, *JSTOR*. 4 April 2021.

¹²⁸ *Ibid*.

actions and creating the self. The religious existentialist seeks meaning as well. Peter Berger argues, “religion is ultimately about creating a coherent and meaningful narrative.”¹²⁹ In Tara Isabella Burton’s book she explains Peter Berger’s view on religion,

Berger characterizes religion as the way in which humans internalize an orderly picture of the world and how we should act within it: what he calls the “nomos.” Nomos [he] writes, is a “shield against terror,” ... rooted in a “human craving for meaning.” Human beings, he says, “are congenitally compelled to impose a meaningful order on reality.” ... Religion serves as the sacred canopy: the only way we feel that we can meaningfully resist anomie, the sense of meaninglessness we experience when we stop to consider the suffering and chaos of existence. The problem of evil and meaninglessness ... is too overwhelming for human beings. ... The social function of religion comes in the way it gives us a sense of personal and social meaning, allowing us to frame our identities within that of a collective cosmic narrative.¹³⁰

Nietzsche saw religion as a way to make sense of the chaotic world around us, merely a narrative to explain existence. As Jessica Hooten Wilson explains,

The Madman, in “The Gay Science,” initially seeks God and finds him nowhere. He then calls out, ‘We have killed [God]--you and I. All of us are his murderers,’ condemning everyone to deicide. ... the Madman calls the churches the tombs of God. In *Bad Religion*, Ross Douhat points out that America ... is not overrun by those without religion, but by those with bad religion, with the heretical belief that they are in charge of their own religion.¹³¹

The idea that we are now in charge of religion as though God is truly dead and does not interact in this world whatsoever is what O’Connor saw as Christian nihilism.

Nietzsche protests that the church ‘created its God according to its needs’ and he accuses Christians of a lack of holiness: ‘Possessing even the tiniest bit of piety in the body, we should find a god who cures a cold at the right time or who bids us enter a coach at the very moment when a violent rainstorm begins, such an absurd god that we should have to abolish him if he existed.’¹³²

This is the God that we treat as though Santa Claus, bending and forming god by our wills. This god should be denied. This is not the reality of the Christian God or the Hebrew God. O’Connor said, a God who is understood is less than yourself, likewise, a god to be manipulated is also less

¹²⁹ Tara Isabella Burton, *Strange Rites*, (Public Affairs, 2020), 28. From *Strange Rites* by Tara Isabella Burton, copyright © 2020. Reprinted by permission of PublicAffairs, an imprint of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

¹³¹ Jessica Hooten Wilson, *Giving the Devil His Due Demonic Authority in the Fiction of Flannery O’Connor and Fyodor Dostoevsky*, (Cascade Books, 2017), 20.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 40.

than yourself. “Nietzsche’s version of the Christian God is merely a spirit who wages war against everything human, natural, and enjoyable.”¹³³ This too is not the God spoken of in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. “Most of the time, psychologically speaking, atheism represents a disappointment with the narrowness and limitations of a certain concept of God.”¹³⁴

The fundamental truth here is that every human being seeks meaning, whether religious or not. The atheist may not believe in God, but may still hold to a moral sense. The nihilist may be a certain sort of believer, even a church-goer, “yet deny that faith and ethics can be justified beyond anything but themselves ... the nihilist regards religious belief and moral virtue as mere conventions...”¹³⁵ Making God in our own image is a common error, which leads Nietzsche to rail against this god who is against the natural and enjoyable. He concludes the Christian god to be an absurd god, at least how the church of his day portrayed God. O’Connor agreed with Nietzsche in the sense of “with the demise of the biblical God, the world is reduced to a dead object awaiting human manipulation.”¹³⁶

What is meant by nihilism? It is the absence of a supra-sensory world “which connects and orients every being.” It also replaces “old values by new ones.” It is no longer something that is transcendent, according to Nietzsche. Values become “the immanent goal of the immanent strivings of human will. And human will has become will to power.”¹³⁷ Louis Blond further explains,

We have measured the value of the world according to categories that refer to a purely fictitious world. For Nietzsche, nihilism names the erroneous founding of values on metaphysical categories. Nihilism entails that all values that are grounded by conceptual, rational and religious

¹³³ Jessica Hooten Wilson, *Giving the Devil His Due*, 41.

¹³⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Grain of Wheat Aphorisms*, (Ignatius Press, 1953), 46.

¹³⁵ Ralph, C. Wood, “Flannery O’Connor, Martin Heidegger, and Modern Nihilism: A Reading of ‘Good Country People,’” *The Flannery O’Connor Bulletin*, 21, (1992): 100, *JSTOR*, 3 April 2021.

¹³⁶ Ralph, C. Wood, *Flannery O’Connor and the Christ-Haunted South*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 203.

¹³⁷ Stijn Latre, “Nietzsche, Heidegger, Girard on ‘The Death of God,’” *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia*, 57.2, (April-June 2001), 301-302, *JSTOR*, 16 April 2021.

principles are now disputed. The fact that we have judged the world by erroneous values means that we have devalued the world we are in. The highest beliefs that we held to be true can no longer be supported due to their lack of foundation. Beliefs become unbelievable: ‘ the highest values devalue themselves.’¹³⁸

Like Berger’s claim of religion being a narrative to make sense of the world, Nietzsche sees values and religion as human constructions, merely stories to make sense of the chaos in the world. Stories are used to make meaning of the world without the existence of a god.¹³⁹

O’Connor was acutely aware of a pervasive existential nihilism within American culture and the church. In her novel *Wise Blood*, the main character Haze Motes is a preacher announcing the Church of Christ Without Christ. No one, in the story, is scandalized by this message because, in O’Connor’s understanding, even those in the church live as though there is no God, as though God is dead, and it is the mission of the church to be the presence of Christ who is no longer here. These are the Christian nominalists, only Christian in name.¹⁴⁰ Her aim in writing fiction was to strike the reader as shockingly as the pervasive nihilism struck the collective culture of her time. Her most potent existential nihilist character is the Misfit in “A Good Man is Hard to Find.”¹⁴¹

‘Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead,’ The Misfit continued, ‘and He shouldn’t have done it. He thrown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it’s nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn’t, then it’s nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can--by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness,’ he said¹⁴²

¹³⁸ Louis, P. Blond, *Heidegger and Nietzsche Overcoming Metaphysics*, (Continuum, 2010), 111-112.

¹³⁹ Narrative is important. It does explain and helps to understand deeper things—but when only reduced to story, religion, revelation, truth, some things that were literal may be eschewed and all practices become merely anthropological.

¹⁴⁰ Kierkegaard called the true Christian the imitator of Christ, not the admirer, in *Practice in Christianity*.

¹⁴¹ Brad Gooch, *Flannery a Life of Flannery O’Connor*, (Little Brown and Company, 2009), 226.

¹⁴² Flannery O’Connor, *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, (Mariner Books Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1976), 21-22.

He shoots the grandmother. After his companions toss her body away, one says “some fun.” And then says, “Shut up Bobby Lee,” ... It’s no real pleasure in life.”¹⁴³ The Misfit wishes he had seen Christ raise the dead and says he could have led a different life. But since he didn’t see it, he can’t believe what he has never seen. He has no faith or belief and only follows his nihilistic tendencies that what he does, does not matter in the long run. His life is short, and he will soon be dead, so what does it matter if he kills others with no remorse. There is only absence, not presence of an Other, a deity; there is only him and his actions that do not matter.

Like existentialists, O’Connor was an individual standing amidst the collective telling how things are, but subversively telling how existence will be and our choice revealed within each character--the choice to reject God or to follow, but more importantly, imitate Christ. She recognized the reality of human suffering and the human condition, but did not sugarcoat it or turn reality into a sentimental “press on, that’s just how things are” or “at least you have your health” or other meaningless, sentimental platitudes. She suffered from lupus for fourteen years and was continuously aware of this suffering existence, but she did not indulge in her suffering. Her faith in the suffering Christ incarnate was her consolation. She was aware of the limitations of the human being--will, intellect, and power. “I believe that the basic experience of everyone is the experience of human limitation.”¹⁴⁴

O’Connor herself said, “If you live today, you breathe in nihilism. In or out of the Church, it’s the gas you breathe.”¹⁴⁵ She saw nihilism as destroying the soul. She agreed with Nietzsche that the nihilist already agreed that God is dead.¹⁴⁶ She was very specific in her stance

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Flannery O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), 131.

¹⁴⁵ Flannery O’Connor, *Collected Works*, (Library of America, 1988), 949.

¹⁴⁶ Wood, “Flannery O’Connor, Martin Heidegger, and Modern Nihilism...,” 101.

against nihilism, her anti-nihilistic stance is on a metaphysics of presence rather than absence.¹⁴⁷

O'Connor was in agreement with the "ancient Greeks that the starting point of all philosophy is the unfathomable mystery there is Something rather than Nothing. ... The cosmos exists in God," not within a void ... "The entire creation a sign of God."¹⁴⁸ In *Mystery and Manners*, O'Connor talks about what makes a good novelist and the difference between an author of faith and an author without belief.

It makes a great difference to the look of a novel whether its author believes that the world came late into being and continues to come by a creative act of God, or whether he believes that the world and ourselves are the product of a cosmic accident. It makes a great difference to his novel whether he believes that we are created in God's image, or whether he believes we create God in our own. It makes a great difference whether he believes that our wills are free, or bound like those of the other animals. St. Augustine wrote that the things of the world pour forth from God in a double way: intellectually into the minds of the angels and physically into the world of things. To the person who believes this--as the western world did up until a few centuries ago--this physical, sensible world is good because it proceeds from a divine source. ... The artist penetrates the concrete world in order to find at its depths the image of its source, the image of ultimate reality. ...when the natural world is seen as good does evil become intelligible as a destructive force and a necessary result of our freedom. For the last few centuries [people seem to be] convinced ...reaches of reality end very close to the surface, that the things of the world do not pour forth from God Many modern novelists have been more concerned with the processes of consciousness than with the objective world outside the mind. In twentieth-century fiction it increasingly happens that a meaningless, absurd world impinges upon the sacred consciousness of author or character; author and character seldom ... explore a world in which the sacred is reflected.¹⁴⁹

O'Connor's aim in her writing is to remind the reader that there is still mystery within this existence and that there is a God who breaks through this seemingly meaningless existence. There is a tendency to discredit the existence of God and goodness because of suffering, and more specifically, the suffering of children. O'Connor reminds us in *Mystery and Manners* that Ivan Karamazov cannot believe if one child is in torment and Camus' hero cannot believe because of the slaughter of the innocents. "In this popular pity, we mark our gain in sensibility

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 105.

¹⁴⁸ Wood, *The Christ-Haunted South*, 204.

¹⁴⁹ O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 156-158.

and our loss of vision.”¹⁵⁰ She thought other ages felt less, but saw more in their faith. O’Connor continues, “In the absence of this faith now, we govern by tenderness. It is a tenderness which, long since cut off from the person of Christ, is wrapped in theory. When tenderness is detached from the source of tenderness, its logical outcome is terror. It ends in forced-labor camps and in the fumes of gas chambers.”¹⁵¹ The context of what O’Connor says above is about a little girl who was dying of cancer in a hospital, Our Lady of Perpetual Help Free Cancer Home in Atlanta. Nihilistic existentialists similar to Ivan and Camus’ hero would view the child’s suffering as proof there is no God. But the Sister’s care for the child in the context of the love of Christ and in Christ’s faith, the suffering of the girl is not meaningless, in fact, Mary Ann’s life was nearly saintly from what those who cared for the child saw.¹⁵² Mary Ann grew in faith despite her suffering and strengthened those around her. O’Connor seems to argue that pity for those suffering removed from the source of Christ could lead to a nihilism and a mercy disposal of those suffering, an extermination very much like what happens in genocides and the holocaust, which was only twenty years prior to O’Connor writing her works. Tenderness coupled with nihilism may very easily lead to holocaust, dehumanizing the useless and unfit and so forth.

She reminds us that “we lost our innocence in the Fall, and our return to it is through the Redemption which was brought about by Christ’s death and by our slow participation in it.”¹⁵³ This is the third way, the way of Christ that Dostoevsky wished to portray in *Notes from Underground*, but was explored further in *The Brothers Karamazov*. O’Connor has the figure of

¹⁵⁰ O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 227.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² The Sisters wrote a book about the child, which O’Connor edited and wrote the introduction.

¹⁵³ O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 148.

Christ and grace present within her fiction, the reader only needs to look for it. Christ is in the shadows, beckoning us, as readers, as humans to see this presence, not an absence.

The Character Hulga in “Good Country People,” exemplifies an existential nihilism. The character seems to support a metaphysics of absence. She directly quotes Heidegger’s *What is Metaphysics?* within the story, “Science, on the other hand, has to assert its soberness and seriousness afresh and declare that it is concerned solely with what-is. Nothing ... If science is right, then one thing stands firm: science wishes to know nothing of nothing. Such is after all the strictly scientific knowledge of Nothing.”¹⁵⁴ Hulga has no regard for her surroundings, “she didn’t like cats or birds or nature.”¹⁵⁵ She embodies the dislike of science because it relies on Nature or the natural-- “Heidegger’s scorn for science.”¹⁵⁶

[A] nihilist like Hulga, “the whole order of the universe” is a mere human fabrication. All meaning and understanding are man-made. The so-called laws of nature and morality are the results of human agreement. ...conventions ... that cannot refer to anything beyond themselves. “Good” and “evil,” “truth” and “error” are words to be enclosed in quotations, for they have no origin in anything ultimate or objective or real. They are the products of neither reason nor revelation but of the human will-to-power.¹⁵⁷

Ralph Wood, scholar of O’Connor’s work, does not completely dismiss Heidegger’s philosophy, he reminds us his philosophy is concerned with “greater human liberty.”¹⁵⁸ For the sake of this paper, I am concerned with the nihilism of absence that leads to a will that is in direct opposition to the good, an objective good, and in O’Connor’s view, a soul destroying absence. Heidegger saw “the world of the Christian God lost its effective force in history. [He] believed that ‘the God of Augustine and Luther and Kierkegaard ... had been reduced to ... the paymaster from whom

¹⁵⁴ O’Connor, “Good Country People,” 185.

¹⁵⁵ O’Connor, *Collected Works*, 268.

¹⁵⁶ Wood, “Flannery O’Connor, Martin Heidegger, and Modern Nihilism...,” 106.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 103.

we receive our virtues' reward ... God with whom we do business.'"¹⁵⁹ In another sense, the human being "is dead to God."¹⁶⁰ Like Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* he presents two ways, usually there aren't only two ways to choose, like the Underground Man in Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, he presents two options, which the Underground Man rejects and barrels down toward nihilism; Dostoevsky in his whole work presents the third way, the way of Christ or the way of grace that O'Connor also presents us with.

Let's explore the existentialism of Hulga as a character. She is a character of rebellion to the established southern culture. She dresses as a child even though she is in her thirties. She is obstinate and contrary toward her mother because she sees her mother as living inauthentically. Her mother is not reflective about her life, always glossing over the reality of things saying, "Nothing is perfect. This was one of Mrs. Hopewell's favorite sayings. Another was: that is life! ... the most important:... well, other people have their opinions too."¹⁶¹ Hulga is reflective of her existence, knowing that she can see through to nothing. She later yells at her mother, "Woman! Do you ever look inside? Do you ever look inside and see what you are not? God!"¹⁶² She wishes to be true to herself since she makes her own meaning. O'Connor tells us, "We're presented with the fact that the Ph.D. is spiritually as well as physically crippled. She believes in nothing but her own belief in nothing, and we perceive that there is a wooden part of her soul that corresponds to her wooden leg."¹⁶³

¹⁵⁹ Wood, *The Christ-Haunted South*, 203.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid. This is not to argue that Heidegger was a nihilist by any means, he is correct in noting that God had been reduced to a paymaster and humans being dead to God. I aim to press the point of reducing God to nothing or non-existence has the possibility of leading toward nihilism that O'Connor saw in her time, although she may have misunderstood Heidegger. But it seems her main point with Hulga is that intellect is not everything and her ideas were on the surface and not deep-rooted.

¹⁶¹ O'Connor, "Good Country People," 179.

¹⁶² Ibid., 184. Hulga saying, "God," in the quote above is ironic and most likely a little humor added by O'Connor.

¹⁶³ O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 99.

The seducer, Hulga, is self-deceived and swindled by the seemingly innocent object--the young Bible salesman. She sets out to seduce the young Bible salesman. She is in bad faith because she lies to him that she's seventeen. She seduces someone much younger than herself. She is bent on dominating one other person "as proof that the cosmos is a vast amoral zero."¹⁶⁴ She desires to free this young "Bible salesman" from "oppressive projections as good and evil, salvation and damnation."¹⁶⁵ By reducing him to an abstract idea as a dumb Christian, she can better subject him to her own will,¹⁶⁶ but in the story, she is deceived. The young man ends up seducing her and is a swindler and liar. "It was like surrendering to him completely. It was like losing her own life and finding it again, miraculously, in his."¹⁶⁷ Manley Pointer, the "Bible salesman" discerns what Hulga loves most, her wooden leg. "The outward and visible sign of her bitter inward grievance, the prosthesis is far more precious than her virginity."¹⁶⁸ He asks to take her leg, she lets him take the most intimate part of herself. She's very protective of her fake leg. "Without the leg she felt entirely dependent on him."¹⁶⁹

"Give me my leg!" ... "What's the matter with you all of a sudden?" he asked, frowning as he screwed the top on the flask and put it quickly back inside the Bible. "You just a while ago said you didn't believe in nothing. I thought you was some girl!" Her face was almost purple. "You're a Christian!" she hissed. "You're a fine Christian! You're just like them all--say one thing and do another. You're a perfect Christian, you're ..." The boy's mouth was set angrily. "I hope you don't think," he said in a lofty indignant tone, "that I believe in that crap! I may sell Bibles but I know which end is up and I wasn't born yesterday and I know where I'm going!"¹⁷⁰

As he leaves and takes the most precious part of herself, her wooden leg, he says, "you ain't so smart! I been believing in nothing ever since I was born."¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁴ Wood, *The Christ-Haunted South*, 205.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 206.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ O'Connor, "Good Country People," 202. Interesting religious language here

¹⁶⁸ Wood, *The Christ-Haunted South*, 207.

¹⁶⁹ O'Connor, "Good Country People," 203.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 204.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 205.

Who are the authentic people in this story? All characters are in rebellion of the reality presented to them. It seems that the Bible salesman is commentary on the outward appearance of “good country people” and “good church-going people,” but something nihilistic is hidden within. Their actions speak for who these characters are, in charge of their own selves. The bulwarks of who she is, the self she has constructed is demolished and she enters a crisis of faith and existence. Hulga protected her leg as though her soul, “No one ever touched it but her. She took care of it as someone else would his soul...”¹⁷²

Hulga has fetishized her resentment against God and the world. She has become like the man whom Kierkegaard described as once being offered happiness ... only to reply ‘How dare you take away my unhappiness, my only *raison d’être*?’ Manley Pointer knows, in the darkened heart of his nihilism that to steal Hulga’s wooden leg is to inflict the utmost devastation ... destroy the very icon of her faith.¹⁷³

Manley Pointer is triumphant in his nihilism in believing in nothing “ever since I was born.” He has deceived the smart, educated Hulga and her shaky faith in nothing.

What does his nihilism reveal? “It reveals that the core of nihilism is ... a calloused way of life, a cold and heartless bent toward annihilation.”¹⁷⁴ He delights in destruction and he enacts this destruction, whereas Hulga is only thinking intellectually about absence and not coldly enacting her nihilism. The grace is that, potentially, Hulga will reverse course and think about and enact an existentialism of presence; the act of her most precious part of herself stolen is an ironic, severe grace—the world she thought she knew is shattered. If we are to use Kierkegaard’s language of the religious self, O’Connor’s aim is that her characters are Christ-haunted, hounded by Christ at their heels, although they are doing all they can to run away from God, but reach a crisis of faith and have the potential to take that leap toward the religious self. O’Connor likes to

¹⁷² Ibid., 201.

¹⁷³ Wood, *The Christ-Haunted South*, 207.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 208.

leave the ending of her stories open-ended to keep it realistic, in that we don't know the full story of the character, just as we do not know the full story of ourselves and others until the entirety is told. There is potential for Hulga to reverse course and seek an understanding of presence rather than absence.

O'Connor was thought to be a nihilistic writer, but her aim was to strike back as hard against the prevailing culture with her grotesque and unsettling short stories and novels. She was a Christian realist and a Thomist. She wrote revealing the world as it is, with its suffering, strangeness, harsh personalities, unsettling large and startling figures, but reminded her readers of the mystery present in the world. She reminded her readers of a presence rather than an absence. Like Nietzsche, she denied the existence of a Santa Claus-like God, but unlike Nietzsche, she did not believe the world was defined by human construction because of the absence and non-existence of God. Religion, to O'Connor, was not solely a means to make meaning of the world or the chaos, but a reality that God is present and speaks within the cosmos and that the world and God is best understood by and because of the incarnate Christ.

In her short story "Good Country People," her character Hulga is an intellectual making meaning of her world with the help of a type of existential philosophy. Instead of presence, Hulga views all things with absence, making meaning within her own freedom and rebellion against social conventions. She seeks to seduce who she thinks is a young, naive Bible salesman, whom she mistakenly believes is a dumb Christian. In turn, she is the one deceived by the actual nihilistic, cruel, cold young man, Manley Pointer. He steals her most precious part of herself, her artificial leg, and, therefore, her belief in nothing. In this simple act what Hulga believed as her reality, her understanding of existence and reality is shattered. She is left with uncertainty. O'Connor, like Dostoevsky offers a third way of seeing existence, through Christ, incarnational:

God acting within a material world through grace. O'Connor was very aware of nihilism in American culture, even within the church. One of her aims in writing was to remind her readers God is not absent within a suffering world; there is still mystery and limitation in our rational constructs and systems. Like Hulga, our intellectualization has limits, grace will not destroy intellect, but redeem it within Presence.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aquinas, Thomas. Edited and Translated by Ralph McInerny. *Selected Writings*. Penguin Books, 1998.
- Aquinas, Thomas. Translated by Father of the English Dominican Province, *Summa Theologica*, 2nd ed., 1920, Article 3. <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/2110.htm>. Date of access: 3/18/20.
- Aresi, Anna. "Dante in T. S. Eliot's Four Quartets." *Literature and Theology*. Vol. 30. no. 4. (December 2016). *JSTOR*. 15 July 2022.
- Balthasar, Hans Urs von. *Grain of Wheat Aphorisms*. Ignatius Press, 1953.
- Blond, Louis, P. *Heidegger and Nietzsche Overcoming Metaphysics*. Continuum, 2010.
- Bruner, Michael. *A Subversive Gospel: Flannery O'Connor and the Reimagining of Beauty, Goodness, and Truth*. IVP Academic, 2017.
- Burton, Tara Isabella. *Strange Rites*. Public Affairs, 2020. From *Strange Rites* by Tara Isabella Burton, copyright © 2020. Reprinted by permission of PublicAffairs, an imprint of Hachette Book Group, Inc.
- Candler, Peter M., Jr., "The Anagogical Imagination of Flannery O'Connor." *Christianity and Literature*. vol. 60. no.1. (Autumn 2010). *JSTOR* 20 March 2022.
- Di Renzo, Anthony. *American Gargoyles Flannery O'Connor and the Medieval Grotesque*. Southern Illinois University Press, 1993.
- Dowell, Bob. "The Moment of Grace in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor." *College English*. Vol. 27, No. 3. (Dec. 1965): 235-239. *JSTOR* 12 March 2020.
- Flath, Carol, A. "Fear of Faith: The Hidden Religious Message of Notes from Underground." *The Slavic and East European Journal*. Vol. 37. No. 4. (Winter 1993): 510-529. *JSTOR*. 4 April 2021.
- Gooch, Brad. *Flannery a Life of Flannery O'Connor*. Little Brown and Company, 2009. From *Flannery*, by Brad Gooch, copyright © 2009. Reprinted by permission of Little, Brown, an imprint of Hachette Book Group, Inc.
- Hutter, Reinhard. "Grace and Charity. Participation in the Divine Nature and Union with God: The Surpassing Contemporary Significance of Thomas Aquinas's Doctrine of Divinization." *Espíritu : cuadernos del Instituto Filosofico de Balmesiana*, Volume: 65, Issue/No: 151 (January 2016), pp. 173-199. *JSTOR* 4 April 2020.

- Kalkavage, Peter. "On Nature and Grace: The Role of Reason in the Life of Faith." *The Imaginative Conservative*.
<https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2014/08/nature-grace-role-reason-life-faith.html>.
Date of access: 3/18/20.
- Kierkegaard, Soren. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. *The Sickness Unto Death*. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1980.
- Kierkegaard, Soren. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. *Practice in Christianity*. Princeton University Press, 1991.
- Kirkland, William M. "Baron von Hugel and Flannery O'Connor." *The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin*. Vol. 18. (1989). *JSTOR* 20 August 2022.
- Latre, Stijn. "Nietzsche, Heidegger, Girard on 'The Death of God.'" *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia*. Vol. 57. No. 2. (April-June 2001): 299-305. *JSTOR*. 16 April 2021.
- Lewis, C. S. *The Problem of Pain*. Harper Collins, 1996. *The Problem of Pain* by CS Lewis © copyright 1940 CS Lewis Pte Ltd. Extract used with permission.
- Meinert, John. "St. Thomas Aquinas, Perseverance, and the Nature/Grace Debate." *Angelicum*. Vol. 93. No. 4. 2016. *JSTOR* 8 October 2022.
- Munk, Linda. "Understanding Understatement: Biblical Typology and 'The Displaced Person.'" Oxford University Press in *Literature and Theology*. vol. 2. No. 2. September 1988. *JSTOR* 4 April 2022.
- O'Connor, Flannery. *A Good Man is Hard to Find*. Mariner Books, 1976.
- *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1993.
- *Letters of Flannery O'Connor The Habit of Being*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979.
- "Essay and Letters." *Collected Works*. The Library of America 39, 1988.
- *Mystery and Manners*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970.
- *A Prayer Journal*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013.
- Olschner, Leonard, M. "Annotations on History and Society in Flannery O'Connor's 'The Displaced Person.'" *The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin*. Vol. 16. 1987. *JSTOR* 4 April 2022.
- Pearce, Joseph. "The Violent Wisdom of Flannery O'Connor." *The Imaginative Conservative*.
<https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2016/02/the-violent-wisdom-of-flannery-oconnor.html>. Date of Access: 3/20/2020.

Rogers, Jonathan. *The Terrible Speed of Mercy: A Spiritual Biography of Flannery O'Connor*. Thomas Nelson, 2012.

Shinn, Thelma J. "Flannery O'Connor and the Violence of Grace." *Contemporary Literature*.

Vol. 9, No. 1 (Winter, 1968), pp. 58-73. *JSTOR* 20 March 2020. by the Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System. Reprinted courtesy of the University of Wisconsin Press.

Srigley, Susan. "O'Connor and the Mystics: St. Catherine of Genoa's Purgatorial Vision in 'Revelation.'" *Flannery O'Connor Review*. vol. 2. 2003-2004. *JSTOR* 13 March 2022.

Toombs, Rachel. "Almost Imperceptible Intrusions of Grace: On Flannery O'Connor's Fiction and Readerly Entanglement." *The Heythrop Journal*. LXII (2021), pp. 900-915.

Wilson, Jessica, Hooten. *Giving the Devil His Due Demonic Authority in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor and Fyodor Dostoevsky*. Cascade Books, 2017. wipfandstock.com

Wood, Ralph, C. *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004.

Wood, Ralph, C. "Flannery O'Connor, Martin Heidegger, and Modern Nihilism: A Reading of 'Good Country People.'" *The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin*. Vol. 21. (1992): 100-118. *JSTOR*. 3 April 2021.