

## FLANNERY O'CONNOR

**Born:** Savannah, Georgia; March 25, 1925

**Died:** Milledgeville, Georgia; August 3, 1964

*In her stories and two short novels, O'Connor combined religious themes from her Roman Catholic vision with comically realistic characters from the rural protestant South to create a fiction that is simultaneously serious and comic.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Mary Flannery O'Connor was born in Savannah, Georgia, on March 25, 1925, the only child of Edward Flannery and Regina Cline O'Connor. Both her parents were Roman Catholics from active Catholic families, a religious heritage that had a deep effect on her thinking and writing. As a child, she attended parochial school and early developed an interest in domestic birds and poultry.

In her later writings she recalled that, when she was five, a newsreel company came to film her pet bantam chicken, which could walk both forward and backward. Years later, in a high school home economics class, she responded to an assignment to make a child's garment by creating a white piqué coat for a pet chicken. Also during her early years, O'Connor began to develop a talent for drawing and cartooning, an interest which remained with her through her life.

In 1938, her father was diagnosed as having disseminated lupus, a progressive disease in which the body forms antibodies to its own tissues. With that, the family moved from Savannah to Milledgeville, Georgia, where Regina O'Connor's father had been mayor. Edward O'Connor died in February of 1941, and Flannery remained in Milledgeville for most of the rest of her life, with time away only during her brief period of healthy adulthood between 1945 and 1950.

In 1942, O'Connor entered Georgia State College for Women (now Women's College of Georgia) in Milledgeville. She graduated with an A.B. degree in English and social sciences in 1945. During her college years, her interests were divided between fiction writing and cartooning. She did both, along with editing, for college publica-

tions. After her graduation, she decided to attend the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa, where she had been awarded a fellowship on the basis of some of her stories, which one of her teachers had submitted to the workshop. It was about this time that she began to drop "Mary" and to use "Flannery" alone as a writing name.

The Writers' Workshop, founded by Paul Engle, was the most prestigious program of its kind when O'Connor was a student there, and she learned much from the experience. One biographer, Harold Fickett, records her willingness to accept criticism from the workshop and her willingness to rewrite work in accord with her teachers' suggestions.

This sort of docility probably did not come easily to O'Connor, who was a person of strong convictions and a willingness to stand up for them. During her time at Iowa, she began to publish stories; her first publication was "The Geranium" in *Accent* in 1946. That story was one of the six of her thesis collection for the M.F.A. degree, which she received in 1947. She stayed on at Iowa for an additional year, teaching and writing the beginnings of her first novel, *Wise Blood* (1952). Her start on that book earned her the Rinehart-Iowa Prize for a first novel.

O'Connor spent much of 1948 at Yaddo, an artists' colony at Saratoga Springs, New York, where she continued to work on *Wise Blood* and where she formed some literary friendships, particularly with the poet Robert Lowell, who introduced her to editor Robert Giroux, who would later publish her work. Through him she made the lifelong friendship of poet and teacher Robert Fitzgerald and his wife, Sally. They, too, were Catholic, and

when O'Connor decided to leave Yaddo, after a short stay in New York, she arranged to board with the Fitzgerald family at their home in Ridgefield, Connecticut.

O'Connor found that a happy time during which, as Harold Fickett records, after Mass, she spent her mornings writing, her afternoons writing letters (including a daily letter to her mother), and her evenings with the Fitzgeralds.

At Christmas, 1950, on the train home to Milledgeville, O'Connor suffered her first attack of lupus. The drug ACTH finally brought the disease under control, but hers had been a serious attack, and her recovery was slow. She was very weak and debilitated for months. Her slow recovery led her to give up her plans to return to the North; for the rest of her life she lived with her mother on her dairy farm, Andalusia, near Milledgeville.

O'Connor's relationship with her mother is reflected in many of her letters, which convey the pair's deep affection and her mother's selfless caregiving, as well as the inevitable stresses which accompanied their living together. For the most part, O'Connor's references to those stresses are indirect and offered with ironic humor (sometimes in a mock-backwoods style) which suggests that even when O'Connor was irritated with her mother's occasional insensitivity to her literary work, she was always certain of her mother's devotion to her and always returned that love, while expressing it in her own style. She once gave her mother a donkey for Mother's Day, saying it was the gift for a mother who had everything.

Through much of the rest of her life, O'Connor followed a standard routine of writing in the morning, riding into Milledgeville for lunch, reading, painting, and caring for her large flock of peafowl and other birds in the afternoons and evenings. After about 1955, she had to use aluminum crutches because the ACTH had weakened her bones so that they would not support her weight. Nevertheless, as her literary reputation increased, she accepted as many lecture invitations as she could.

Some of her addresses have been published as *Mystery and Manners* (1969). Only once did O'Connor travel abroad, in 1958, when her mother persuaded her to travel to Lourdes, France, in the hope of a miraculous cure for her lupus. The trip was an arduous one, and O'Connor under-

took it mostly to please her mother. After the trip, she wrote to a friend, "Now for the rest of my life I can forget about going to Europe, having went." Her mother's dreamed-of cure did not occur.

During her years at Andalusia, O'Connor wrote and published a collection of short stories, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (1955), and a second novel, *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960). At her death, she had just completed a second collection of stories, published posthumously as *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1965). She also carried on a voluminous correspondence with other writers, publishers, friends, and readers, some of which is collected in *The Habit of Being: Letters* (1979), edited by her friend Sally Fitzgerald. O'Connor's letters testify to her lively sense of humor (often self-deprecating) and to her interest in the opinions, reading habits, and spiritual states of the people she loved.

In 1964, O'Connor had surgery for the removal of a fibroid tumor. The surgery was successful, but it reactivated her lupus, and her condition deteriorated as she fought to finish her second collection of stories. She died in Milledgeville on August 3, 1964, at the age of thirty-nine.

#### ANALYSIS

O'Connor always saw herself as writing from an explicitly Christian point of view; indeed, given her convictions, that was the only way she could consider writing. She saw her religion as liberation and considered it a vocation in much the way one might be called to the priesthood. At the same time, she resented the sentimental expectations that people frequently hold toward what they might call "religious" fiction—maudlin stories about deathbed conversions and inspirational saints' lives.

O'Connor undermined those expectations by her use of humor; she avoided pious characters and conventionally "churchy" settings. Instead, she drew her characters and settings from the rural South she knew so well. Those characters were sometimes labeled grotesques by critics and scholars, but she rejected the term, feeling that it originated with writers who understood the South as little as they understood Christianity, a condition of ignorance she intended to remedy. She understood that she was writing to a secular world, and she intended to instruct it in the Christian understanding of grace and redemption as the elements

most central to human life. At the same time, O'Connor recognized the dangers of becoming a sermonizer instead of an artist (she talked about that issue in some of her addresses), although the satiric humor in her style, the violence in her plots, and her strange characters made it unlikely that she would fall into that difficulty.

O'Connor's themes return to the issue of grace and redemption again and again. In her first novel, *Wise Blood*, the central character, Hazel Motes, begins as a man who is determined to escape the compelling image of Jesus which haunts him. His death, however, is an affirmation of grace, as O'Connor is careful to make clear in imagery which suggests that in his death Hazel is returning to Bethlehem.

O'Connor's other novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*, has a similar major theme. Its central character is Francis Marion Tarwater, a boy who, like Motes, is attempting to escape a calling. At the end of the novel, however, he is setting out to return to the city in his new role as prophet. What both Motes and Tarwater have experienced is the lacerating effect of God's grace, a grace which, O'Connor implies, is far removed from its syrupy portrayal in popular hymns. Instead, it seems to have more in common with the terrifying experiences of Old Testament prophets, for whom it is manifested as God's relentless insistence on bestowing mercy as he chooses.

O'Connor's short stories reveal similar thematic material. In "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" (1953), one sees a foolish and self-centered old woman who comes to a moment of grace just as she ceases mouthing platitudes to a mass murderer who is going to kill her seconds later. In "Revelation" (1964), smug, self-satisfied Ruby Turpin has a vision that teaches her what she never before understood—that the last shall be first in Heaven and that her material well-being is not necessarily a mark of divine favor. Similarly, in "The River" (1955), the little boy simply accepts the preacher's assertion that baptism in the river leads to the kingdom of Christ.

It also leads to his death by drowning, but, as O'Connor shows from the rest of the characters, he has paradoxically died into life, while people such as his worldly parents are caught in a sort of living death.

Violence is often an element in O'Connor's stories; in fact, she once said that her own faith made

her conscious of the constant presence of death in the world, and her illness must have had the same effect. That probably explains the large number of deaths in her stories, and it may also account for the strong sense of danger in many of them. In "Good Country People" (1955), for example, Hulga's wooden leg is stolen by a dishonest Bible salesman. In "Revelation," mentioned above, Mrs. Turpin is attacked in the doctor's office by a girl who has suddenly gone mad.

Events and characters such as these are the source of the charge that O'Connor's characters are grotesques. The word seems to imply that they are too exaggerated to belong in realistic fiction.

Early critics, especially, had a difficult time understanding what O'Connor intended, and they often believed that characters such as Tarwater and Hazel Motes were simply insane or too out of touch with modern values (which the critics themselves, O'Connor felt, too often embodied) to be taken seriously.

O'Connor's comments about her own work, however, make clear that she was quite serious about them. Her backwoods preachers, she believed, came closer to understanding the human condition in relationship to God than any number of psychologists, teachers, and sociologists, none of whom ever appear very flatteringly in her fiction.

Another way of looking at the issue of the grotesque in O'Connor's work, however, may lend more weight to the charge. Her novels and stories are peopled almost entirely with characters who are the result of O'Connor's satiric view of the world. They are often funny, but they are almost always unpleasant. Enoch Emery in *Wise Blood* is an excellent example of this kind of characterizing. Almost everything about him is simultaneously funny and terrible. His ignorance is responsible for much of his grotesque response to the world. He hates and fears the zoo animals he guards; he never knows how ludicrous he looks to others, and so he imagines that the ugly cook at the snack shop is in love with him and that no one knows he hides in the bushes to watch the women at the swimming pool.

His only real hero is Gonga the Gorilla from films. It is characteristic of O'Connor's work that even Enoch Emery's father, who never appears

in the novel at all, is another example of ugliness and brutality.

On his return from the penitentiary, Enoch's father gave him a gag gift: a can that appeared to contain peanut brittle but, when opened, released a steel spring that popped out and broke Enoch's two front teeth.

Again and again O'Connor offers comic but extremely unflattering pictures of the people who inhabit her characters' worlds. In "Revelation," for example, all the people in the doctor's office are grimly funny reminders of the varieties of human ugliness—Mrs. Turpin, who offends the reader with smugness and bigotry; Mary Grace, the mad girl who goes to college but who makes her ugliness even worse by making faces at Mrs. Turpin; the "white trash" family that sits immobile in poverty, ignorance, and dirt. Even Mrs. Turpin's husband, Claud, a man she really loves, is revealed by his racist jokes to be as corrupt as everyone else in the story.

Unremitting human ugliness is a source of much of O'Connor's humor. She is able to present the dirty, the disfigured, and the stupid as also funny and recognizable as inhabitants of the real world. Because they are almost the only inhabitants of O'Connor's fictional world, they probably justify the term grotesque.

Another characteristic of O'Connor's style that concerns her characters is her use of southern dialects, especially those associated with poor white people. In her earlier stories, she often indicated some of their quality with spelling. In *Wise Blood*, for example, the phrase "worse than having them" is spelled "worsen havinum." O'Connor reduced the number of such dialect indicators in her later work, but she always took joy in the sounds and sometimes the flamboyance of southern speech. "THE PROPHET I RAISE UP OUT OF THIS BOY WILL BURN YOUR EYES CLEAN," old Tarwater writes to his worldly nephew. In "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," the Misfit quotes his father speaking about him: "It's some that can live their whole life out without asking about it and it's others has to know why it is, and this boy is one of the latters."

One other issue about O'Connor's characters deserves mention, and that concerns race. O'Connor's stories almost all contain black characters—not surprisingly, as all but one are set in the South. O'Connor wrote much of her work in the period

just before the first nationwide attention to civil rights, so it may seem curious that she never addressed that issue directly in her fiction. Some scholars have made an effort to find evidence of her sympathy for the growing Civil Rights movement in her work, but such evidence is very slight, if it exists at all.

O'Connor herself implied that southern black and white people inhabited worlds that were so different that a white writer could never really expect to understand the black world. Still, her black characters seem no less attractive than her white ones (none of them is very sympathetic anyway), and the racist comments in her stories come from characters who are themselves racists and would be likely to say such things (a good example is the doctor's office conversations in "Revelation").

In contrast to her basically satiric view of human characters, O'Connor's physical descriptions of people and landscapes are often serious, dramatic, and weighted with symbolism. References to eyes and their color and to the various colors and qualities of the sky are numerous in almost every story. The sky and particularly the sun often seem intended to evoke images of God and Christ looking down on the world.

The sun is an ancient symbol for Christ, and O'Connor's descriptions make clear that the references are intentional. Another frequent symbol in her work is the use of birds to suggest the Holy Spirit or even, in the case of peacocks, Christ himself. Other animals sometimes appear as well, particularly pigs and monkeys, which often seem intended to suggest the bestial nature of fallen humanity, intelligent but debased and corrupt (the pigs in "Revelation" and Gonga in *Wise Blood* are good examples).

Like many writers, O'Connor often gave symbolic or evocative names to her characters, and they are often worth considering in that light. Mary Grace in "Revelation," for example, is certainly an agent of divine grace in that story. Hazel ("Haze") Motes's name seems to draw one's attention to his cloudy or hazy vision, reminding the reader of the biblical injunction not to try to take the mote or speck from another's eye until one has removed the beam from one's own. Tarwater, the protagonist of *The Violent Bear It Away*, simply has the name of an old folk remedy.

O'Connor's literary reputation has risen steadily since her death. Modern readers are increasingly likely to see her serious intentions while relishing her humor. Her debt to Nathaniel Hawthorne has long been noted, but some scholars have begun to notice, too, her debt to Mark Twain—the former for his concern for moral issues, the latter for his comic view. It is on that combination of qualities that O'Connor's reputation rests.

## WISE BLOOD

**First Published:** 1952

**Type of work:** Novel

*A backwoods preacher attempts to escape his call but at last gives in to a sort of martyrdom.*

*Wise Blood* was O'Connor's first novel; she began work on it while she was still in the Iowa Writers' Workshop. It embodies most of her major themes, and it contains some of her best comedy. It is flawed, however, by her difficulties in pulling the two parts of the plot together. The Enoch Emery story is never fully integrated into the Hazel Motes story. O'Connor also had difficulties clarifying the issues about Motes's past that have turned him into what she called a "Christian *malgre lui*," a Christian in spite of himself.

The novel opens on a train as Hazel Motes leaves the Army. He is the grandson of a backwoods preacher, but he finds the image of a Jesus who insists on claiming the human recipients of his mercy to be unbearably disturbing. He has resisted inheriting his grandfather's role, that of preaching from the hood of a car to listeners on a small-town square. Hazel has long decided that he wants to avoid that Jesus, first by trying to avoid sin and later by asserting that Jesus is nothing more than a trick.

Even on the train, however, O'Connor makes clear that Hazel's cheap blue suit—brand-new, with the price tag (\$11.98) still attached—and his black hat look exactly like the traditional garb of the preacher he refuses to be. Nevertheless, Hazel startles his worldly fellow passengers by suddenly claiming that if they are saved he would not want to be.

Like many such comments in O'Connor's work, this carries an ironic weight, for it is quite

clear that salvation is the last thing the ladies in the dining car desire.

When Hazel arrives in the city of Taulkinham, he heads for the house of a prostitute, Leora Watts, as the next step in asserting that sin is an irrelevant issue in his life. Significantly, however, both the cab driver and Leora herself identify Hazel as a preacher, an identification he violently rejects.

Soon Hazel sees a street preacher, Asa Hawks, who claims to have blinded himself as a demonstration of faith, although early in the novel the reader learns that his blindness is a sham. Hazel is both drawn to and repelled by Hawks and his adolescent daughter Sabbath Lily. Gradually it comes to Hazel that seducing Hawks's daughter would make a dramatic assertion of sin's irrelevance.

In the course of seeking Hawks's house, Hazel meets Enoch Emery. Enoch is eager to tell Hazel—or anyone—his story, about how his father gave him to a welfare woman who sent him off to the Rodemill Boys' Bible Academy and from whom he later escaped. Now he works for the city as a zoo guard. Desperately lonely and not very smart, Enoch ignores Hazel's rebuffs and follows him like a puppy, offering to help him find where Hawks lives. Like Hawks, Enoch senses Hazel's intense concern with Jesus. Hawks, in fact, says that some preacher has left his mark on Haze, but Hazel insists that he believes in nothing at all.

To prove his point, Hazel sets about buying a car, an ancient, rat-colored Essex, for which he pays forty dollars. The car seems to be Hazel's vision of American materialism ("Nobody with a good car needs to be justified," he says), but significantly he uses it exactly as his grandfather had used his Ford, as a platform to preach from. His one attempt to use the car in a "traditional" American way, for a date with Sabbath Lily, turns out to be a travesty. It is notable that the first thing Hazel does with his car is to stop in the middle of the highway to read a "Jesus Saves" sign.

Meanwhile, Enoch Emery is acting out his own sort of religion. Enoch claims to have "wise blood," which tells him what to do, and, in fact, he acts mostly from instinct. He insists that Hazel meet him at the park where he works, and after an elaborate set of ritual activities that include going through the zoo to ridicule the animals, Enoch leads Hazel to the city museum. Enoch finds it a



place of enormous mystery because its name is carved, Roman-style, on the front, MVSEVM, creating a word that Enoch is unable to pronounce—like Yahweh, the unutterable name of God in the Old Testament. Inside the museum, Enoch shows Hazel the tiny, mummified man which has captured his imagination, but Hazel is unimpressed.

Hazel has rented a room in the house where Hawks and his daughter live, begun his plan to seduce Sabbath Lily (a plan he executes with a remarkable lack of finesse), and started a sort of church, the Church of Christ Without Christ, to dramatize his rejection of faith. Hazel's preaching is met with public indifference; however, after a few nights, he gains a disciple in the form of a former radio preacher, Onnie Jay Holy (his real name is Hoover Shoats), who shows no understanding of Hazel's message but is certain that money can be made from it if they "keep it sweet." He cannot understand why Hazel is unwilling to collect money from his audience. When Hazel runs him off, Holy threatens to run Hazel out of business.

Holy attempts to make good on that threat with a rival preacher whom he calls the True Prophet, a man who preaches the Holy Church of Christ-Without Christ directly across the street from Hazel's post. The two are dressed exactly alike. Hazel's only comment is ambiguous: "If you don't hunt it down and kill it, it'll kill you." When Hazel returns to his room, he is met by Sabbath Lily, who tells him that Hawks has abandoned her, presumably because Hazel discovered his fraudulent blindness. She moves in with Hazel.

On the heels of these events, Enoch Emery reenters the plot. Listening to his wise blood, Enoch has undergone what can only be described as purification rituals, cleaning his room and fasting to prepare for stealing what he believes to be the "new Jesus" of Hazel's church—the mummy from the city museum. He delivers the mummy to Sabbath Lily, who is supposed to keep it for Hazel. Enoch then disappears from the novel in a dramatic way: He steals Gongala's gorilla suit from the actor who impersonates the monster and travels to the country. The reader last sees him, stripped of his human clothing and identity, standing in his gorilla suit in the countryside, happy at last.

Returning to Sabbath Lily, Hazel finds her holding the mummy. O'Connor takes pains to

make the scene look like a parody of a Madonna and Holy Child, an effect which is heightened by Hazel's blurred vision; he is wearing his mother's old reading glasses, the ones she used to read the Bible. Infuriated by the sight, he seizes the mummy and bangs it against the wall, releasing the sawdust inside it. Like Hazel's perception of Jesus, it is empty and worthless. On that note, Sabbath Lily leaves him, saying that she always knew that he wanted nothing but Jesus anyway.

Hazel hunts down the True Prophet, Solace Layfield, follows him home, and prepares to run over him with the Essex. O'Connor's imagery makes clear that in some sense it is himself that Hazel is killing, perhaps especially his fraudulent self.

Unlike the True Prophet, Hazel's deception is his insistence that no redemption exists, that Jesus is nothing but trickery. For that reason it is significant that Layfield dies after making a confession of his sins and calling on Jesus. In an ironic reversal of Hazel, Layfield's preaching was false, but his life finally recognized the truth.

Hazel now has only one thing left—the Essex. In it, he sets out to find new preaching territory, but he is stopped by a policeman who discovers that he has no driver's license. Casually, callously, the policeman pushes the Essex off a cliff. "Them that don't have a car don't need a license," he says, unknowingly echoing Hazel's comments about justification.

Hazel has now been stripped of all the trappings of his faithless life—his church, his sexual attachment, and his car. He has come to the dark night that opens his eyes and—with the same sort of irony that Oedipus's life fulfilled—having seen the truth, Hazel blinds himself.

The rest of the novel is told from the point of view of Mrs. Flood, his scheming and dishonest landlady. The idea of self-mortification as a penance is completely foreign to her; she never understands why Hazel has blinded himself or why he cares nothing about his social security check or why he might feel a need to punish himself. Hazel says only that he has done these things "to pay." Gradually Mrs. Flood becomes less interested in stealing from Hazel and more interested in understanding him. She is especially fascinated by his ruined eyes, which somehow remind her of the light of the star on Christmas cards. After Hazel

has wandered away from home, sick and blind, he is found in a ditch by two policemen who casually, meaninglessly, beat him to death.

They return the body to Mrs. Flood, who is moved by the sight to think of that retreating point of light which O'Connor has already described.

The implications are that Hazel has been reborn in the ditch where he died, that he is moving back to Bethlehem, called by the truly wise blood of Christ, and perhaps that even the venal Mrs. Flood has begun a similar journey.

## THE VIOLENT BEAR IT AWAY

**First Published:** 1960

**Type of work:** Novel

*A young man tries to escape his late uncle's directive to baptize his cousin but finds the spiritual legacy unavoidable.*

*The Violent Bear It Away* shares many qualities with *Wise Blood*. Francis Marion Tarwater is much like Hazel Motes in his efforts to escape what seems to be a divine call and, like Hazel, he at last must give in to God's imperative. This novel is more tightly unified than *Wise Blood*. Although it lacks some of *Wise Blood*'s humor, it also lacks its loose ends.

Francis Marion Tarwater (named for the Swamp Fox, the Revolutionary War hero) has been raised in the woods by his great-uncle Mason Tarwater, a bootlegger and prophet. Mason has assured young Francis that he will inherit his great-uncle's call and that after Mason's death, the young man's first task will be to baptize Bishop, his retarded cousin, the son of Tarwater's nephew Rayber. When Rayber was seven, old Tarwater had kidnapped him, taking him to the backwoods and baptizing him, though he kept him only a few days. Years later, old Tarwater had kidnapped Francis Marion, the son of Rayber's promiscuous sister; this time he managed to keep the child. He has raised him to be a prophet who will carry on his own tradition by rescuing young Bishop from his father's godless life.

Young Tarwater has doubts about his calling, however, from the very beginning of the novel, and when his great-uncle dies, he quickly rejects

his first task, which is to bury the old man according to his carefully rehearsed plans. Instead, the boy (he is fourteen) gets drunk, and, rather than digging the decent grave his great-uncle expected, Tarwater burns down the cabin with, as he supposes, his great-uncle's body in it. Only much later does he learn that a neighboring black man, shocked at the boy's faithlessness, buried the old man while the boy was unconscious.

In this early section of the novel, O'Connor introduces a character called "the stranger," who is actually a voice in young Tarwater's head. Tarwater and the stranger have a series of dialogues in which it becomes clear that the stranger represents a version of the kind of rationalism that Rayber displays—perhaps an even more cynical kind, as it actually rejects the old man's religion, while Rayber mostly ignores it.

Having disposed of his great-uncle, Tarwater decides to go to the city to see his uncle Rayber, whom he saw once, years before. At Rayber's house, Tarwater discovers that his uncle intends to reverse the kidnapping. Just as the old man once tried to save Rayber, Rayber now intends to save Tarwater from what he can see only as religious mania.

In his sterile, academic way, he believes that Tarwater and his uncles are mere relics from a superstitious past. Old Tarwater himself had once stayed for a while at Rayber's house, hoping to get access to his soul, but he gave up in horror and disgust when he realized that Rayber had made him the subject of an article in an academic journal. Young Tarwater's feelings about Rayber are ambivalent.

On one hand, he has nothing but contempt for his passionless uncle, who seems trapped in his own rationalistic view of the world. He also finds his young cousin Bishop (an interesting name for the child of an atheist) to be repellent, even while the child seems drawn to him. On the other hand, despite the whisperings of the stranger, it



is clear that Tarwater feels his call as surely as Hazel Motes felt his. Rayber recognizes that nearly every time Tarwater and Bishop are near water, Tarwater considers performing the baptism. In fact, Rayber tries to defuse the issue by offering to allow Tarwater to do the baptism in an attempt to make the sacrament meaningless, but Tarwater will have none of it.

Wandering the city at night in an effort to escape Rayber's constant talk, Tarwater gazes for a long time in a bakery window. Later, he spends a long time at a revival, listening to a child evangelist.

Tarwater is wrestling with his great-uncle's promise to turn him into a prophet who will burn Rayber's eyes clean, a calling he wishes to reject as completely as he rejects Bishop. Ironically, Rayber, the rational man, has also tried to reject his son by attempting to drown him, an attempt that failed when he lost his nerve. At Lake Cherokee, on a fishing trip organized by Rayber, Tarwater both baptizes and drowns Bishop.

From this point on in the novel, O'Connor emphasizes Tarwater's hunger; it is a hunger nothing can fill. He vomits up the hot dogs he ate at the lake. Hitchhiking home, he accepts a sandwich from a truck driver but cannot eat it; his mind rejects food even while his body cries for it.

This hunger is part of the novel's central metaphor. Eyes and vision dominated *Wise Blood* (they are important here, too), but in *The Violent Bear It Away* the central image is the "bread of life," to which Tarwater refers again and again. The bread of life is a New Testament metaphor for Jesus and is the central image of the sacrament of Communion.

That seems to be the bread Tarwater was gazing at in the bakery; that is the bread he concluded he did not hunger for when his great-uncle preached to him. When Tarwater first sees Bishop, however, he has a sudden vision of "his own stricken image of himself, trudging into the distance in the bleeding stinking mad shadow of Jesus, until at least he received his reward, a broken fish, a multiplied loaf."

Tarwater's hunger is spiritual, and it cannot be filled by the drugged liquor in the satanic stranger's flask that Tarwater drinks on his ride home, even though he exclaims that it tastes better than the bread of life.

That evil stranger takes the unconscious Tarwater to the deep woods and rapes him. When he regains consciousness, Tarwater knows what has happened and somehow recognizes that the event is like the biblical Jonah's being swallowed by the fish; it is God's directing him into prophecy. He returns home and has a vision of old Tarwater's feasting on the miraculous loaves and fishes. Suddenly he understands the source of his hunger and starts out for the city to begin his career of prophecy.

Aside from bread, fish fill the other part of the novel's metaphoric structure. They appear not only in Tarwater's vision but also in almost every mention of old Tarwater's eyes. It is even on a fishing trip that Bishop is baptized, a baptism which O'Connor means the reader to take seriously, even though Tarwater has not yet accepted his calling, for the power of the sacrament exists outside the failings of the one celebrating it. The novel's conclusion suggests that now Tarwater will turn his attention to Rayber and the rest of the city.

## "A GOOD MAN IS HARD TO FIND"

**First Published:** 1953 (collected in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, 1955)

**Type of work:** Short story

*A smug old woman is jolted out of her complacency by a confrontation with a mass murderer.*

"A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is one of O'Connor's most frequently anthologized short stories, and it makes an excellent illustration of her ability to combine grotesque humor with serious thematic material.

The story opens as a family prepares to go on vacation in Florida. The story focuses immediately on the grandmother, who wants to visit relatives in east Tennessee and who uses the escape of the Misfit, a murderer, from prison to try to persuade her son, Bailey, to change his mind. He refuses. The two grandchildren, John Wesley and June Star, are quickly characterized as smart alecks who nevertheless understand their grandmother and her motives very well. When the family sets out,



the grandmother is resigned to making the best of things.

She is first to get into the car and has even, secretly, brought along her cat. As she rides along, her conversation is conventional, self-centered, and shallow.

When the family stops for lunch at a barbeque stand, their conversation again turns to the Misfit, and the adults agree that people are simply not as nice as they used to be. Later, back in the car, the grandmother persuades Bailey to take a road which she imagines (wrongly, as it turns out) will lead by an old mansion. Suddenly the cat escapes its basket and jumps on Bailey's neck, and the car runs into the ditch. As the family assesses its injuries, a man who is obviously the Misfit drives up with his armed henchmen. The grandmother immediately feels that she recognizes him as someone she has known all of her life, and she tells him that she knows who he is.

Methodically, the henchmen lead first Bailey and then the mother and children off to be shot in the woods while the Misfit begins to talk about himself and his life of crime. He blames his career on Jesus, who, he says, threw everything "off balance" by raising the dead. Because the Misfit cannot be sure that the miracle really occurred, he cannot know how to think about it. If Jesus really raised the dead, the Misfit says, the only logical response would be to drop everything and follow him. If he did not, then life is meaningless and only crime makes sense: "No pleasure but in meanness."

The grandmother is terrified; she knows that she, too, will be shot. Yet she knows something more, and suddenly she stops her empty prayers and meaningless assertions that the Misfit is a "good man," to utter perhaps the truest words of her life in telling him that he is one of her own children.

At that, the Misfit shoots her, but he says that she would have been a good woman if someone had been there to shoot her every minute of her life. O'Connor intends the reader to take the Misfit's comments seriously (he is the most serious-minded character in the story, after all) and notice that the grandmother, in her moment of receiving grace, has recognized that she and the Misfit (and presumably all the rest of humanity) are related as children of God. She is left in death smiling up at God's sky.

## "THE ARTIFICIAL NIGGER"

**First Published:** 1955 (collected in *The Complete Stories*, 1971)

**Type of work:** Short story

*Old Mr. Head and his grandson overcome their estrangement in a reconciliation brought on by a plaster statue.*

In "The Artificial Nigger," Old Mr. Head and his ten-year-old grandson, Nelson, live in a state of subdued tension in which each works to outdo the other. Their planned trip to Atlanta (they live in rural Georgia) has made this competition worse.

Even though Nelson has never been to the city, he is cheekily sure that he will enjoy it.

Gradually the reader understands that Mr. Head is thoroughly uncertain of his own ability to manage in the city, and he uses the sight of the city's black people (a race Nelson has never seen) as a sort of weapon over Nelson, a threat of something foreign that he may find frightening but with which his grandfather can claim, not quite accurately, to be familiar. Nelson is unimpressed with his grandfather's talk.

When they arrive in the city, Mr. Head is frightened by Nelson's immediate delight in it and by his refusal to be intimidated by the unfamiliar. After walking for a while, they become lost and, at the same time, realize that they have also lost their lunch bag. Nelson takes things into his own hands and asks directions from a black woman to whom he feels drawn, but Mr. Head's resentment grows.

At last, while Nelson naps at the curbside, Mr. Head finds a way to retaliate and hides from the boy. When Nelson awakens, he thinks he has been abandoned and races into the street, knocking down an old woman. That is when Mr. Head commits his worst sin and denies knowing Nelson at all.

His grandson is deeply wounded and refuses all of his grandfather's subsequent attempts to make peace. Mr. Head feels certain that this is a divine judgment on him. They walk on in separate misery, getting ever more lost, until Mr. Head cries out to a passing stranger, "Oh Gawd I'm Lost!" The two are rescued with directions to the train station.

It is the sight of a plaster lawn statue of a black man (or child, the statue being too battered to be easily identified) that really reconciles the pair.

The statue's pictured misery seems to be a monument to the black man's victory, a portrayal which moves both Mr. Head and his grandson. The notion that, in a city which already has so many black people, someone should feel the necessity to make an artificial one strikes them both as mysterious and somehow powerful. Reunited, they travel home peacefully, having miraculously escaped the consequences of their anger.

### "GOOD COUNTRY PEOPLE"

**First Published:** 1955 (collected in *The Complete Stories*, 1971)

**Type of work:** Short story

*Hulga's negative view of the world is challenged by the even greater nihilism of a dishonest Bible salesman.*

In "Good Country People," Mrs. Hopewell's perennial optimism is balanced by what seems to be her daughter Joy's self-chosen misery. It is characteristic of Joy's attitude that she has changed her name to Hulga, evidently because it is the ugliest name she can think of. In that way, her name matches her faded sweatshirt, her scowl, and her wooden leg (she lost her leg in a hunting accident long before).

While her mother is frustrated by her daughter's bad temper, she is equally frustrated by her daughter's Ph.D. in philosophy, a degree which makes her unable easily to identify her daughter's achievement to others. She worries that Hulga never seems to enjoy anything, not even young men.

That makes her concerned when Hulga, an atheist who refuses to let her mother keep a Bible in the parlor, confronts Manley Pointer, a freshfaced and earnest-seeming Bible salesman who wins Mrs. Hopewell's trusting heart with his brave stories of childhood hardships and religious devotion.

Partly as a joke, Hulga agrees to meet Pointer on a picnic. The falsity of their relationship is marked by the thirty-two-year-old Hulga telling Pointer that she is seventeen, while he calls her both brave and sweet. It has occurred to Hulga that she might be able to seduce Pointer.

At the picnic it becomes clear that Pointer has similar ideas and that, in fact, he is far more cynical than Hulga. His hollow Bible contains playing cards, whiskey, and condoms. He is hardly one of the "good country people" of the title. Perhaps that cynicism is what wins enough of Hulga's confidence that she lets him see her wooden leg and even remove it from her, although she feels helpless without it. That is when Pointer announces that he collects things such as glass eyes and wooden legs, marks of his own complete nihilism. "I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!" he exclaims. Hulga is left in the hayloft to think about the real meaning of unbelief.

### "REVELATION"

**First Published:** 1964 (collected in *The Complete Stories*, 1971)

**Type of work:** Short story

*A smug, self-satisfied woman awakens to new values when she is attacked in a doctor's office and then experiences a vision.*

"Revelation" opens in a doctor's waiting room where Ruby Turpin is waiting with her husband, Claud. As she often does, Mrs. Turpin passes the time by categorizing the other waiting-room inhabitants by class—"white trash," middle class (like her), and so forth. This is the segregated South, so there are no black people here, but Mrs. Turpin is happy to judge them, too.

She identifies a pleasant-looking woman as one of her own class, and they begin an idle conversation that centers first on their possessions and eventually on their disapproval of civil rights demonstrators. They conclude that it would be a good idea to send all black people back to Africa. During this conversation, the other woman's daughter, Mary Grace, an obese college student with severe acne, has been making faces directly at Mrs. Turpin. At last Mary Grace cracks entirely, throws her book (*Human Development*) at Mrs. Turpin, and then physically attacks her. When Mary Grace has been subdued, Mrs. Turpin begins to think that the girl has a message for her, and when she moves closer, Mary Grace calls her a warthog and tells her to go back to hell where she came from.

Later, at home, Mrs. Turpin is deeply shaken by the message. At last, while hosing down the hogs, she questions God about why he sent her such a message when there was plenty of "trash" in the room to receive it. His answer comes in the form of a vision of people marching to Heaven, a procession led by all the people she has most held in contempt.

The vision fades, and Mrs. Turpin returns to the house in the midst of a cricket chorus of hallelujahs. Critics have disagreed about the meaning of the end of this story, but Mrs. Turpin's serious acceptance of the violent message of grace and the imagery of the ending seem to suggest that her vision was a gift of mercy that has clarified her vision of the world, its people, and her possessions.

### SUMMARY

Serious fiction with religious themes has never been common in American literature, and perhaps that explains part of why O'Connor has frequently been misunderstood. When one views her work in the context of her Catholic orthodoxy, however, its focus becomes clear. The fact that most of her characters are evangelical Protestants simply reflects her use of the population around her to inhabit her stories. Her intense concern with divine grace and redemption as the central facts of human life does not preclude her use of humor to communicate her ideas about that concern and her distrust of the secular rationalism that she believed pervades most of American life.

*Ann D. Garbett*

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*Wise Blood*, 1952

*The Violent Bear It Away*, 1960

#### NONFICTION:

*Mystery and Manners*, 1969

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What evidence is there in Flannery O'Connor's fiction that its author was a devout Roman Catholic?
- According to the title of one of O'Connor's stories, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." Can you find any good men in her work? What makes them "good"?
- How does violence function in O'Connor's work?
- O'Connor's fiction is often said to be characterized by "black humor." How does O'Connor create humor in her work?
- How does O'Connor use the motif of a journey to organize her fictions?
- In what ways does racism show up in O'Connor's work?
- How does O'Connor use the names of characters (for example, Hazel Motes, Francis Marion Tarwater, Mr. Head) to develop themes in her fiction?
- O'Connor's work is often described as "grotesque." In what ways can her characters and plots be considered grotesque?

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