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THE "BLACK LINE OF WOODS":
SACRAMENTAL IMAGERING IN FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S EVERYTHING THAT RISES
MUST CONVERGE

Bethany Lytle

NOTE: NEED AT LEAST FOUR (4) ORIGINALS

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Austin Peay State University

Scholarly Thesis

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Statement of Critical Principles and Influences

Much of the scholarship on Flannery O'Connor's work has been written from a religious critical viewpoint. Indeed, it is almost impossible to read or write about her work without at least acknowledging the appearance of biblical characters and Christian themes; however, many critics try to ignore or explain away these Christian themes (e.g. Harold Bloom, who considers O'Connor's worldview to be Gnostic instead of Thomistic). I see O'Connor's work as being read most correctly when the Christian elements, especially ones dealing with the integration and action of God's grace in and through humans and the natural world, are recognized as what she considered the most important part of her work as an author. Because of this, I would like to study several selections from O'Connor's collection *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, from a critical perspective that understand O'Connor's religion and takes it seriously. My particular contribution to the great deal of study surrounding this facet of O'Connor's work will be to seek and discuss every occurrence of the phrase "black line of woods" and other example of distant, dark tree lines in this collection, something which arises again and again in different stories as a Christ figure and sign of God's grace in the natural world. I will show how this "black line of woods" fits in not only with O'Connor's Southern concern with the preservation of agrarian life (and possibly as a rebellion against "Northern" intellectualism), but more importantly with the recognition of life lived close to nature as something which brings humans close to God. In this way, I will focus specifically on the importance of Thomistic thought in these short stories. In

Everything that Rises Must Converge, O'Connor uses St. Thomas' arguments against the Manichean separation of the spiritual world from the material world. She does this by integrating elements from the physical world into her stories and using them as symbolic offerings of God's grace. O'Connor thus sees nature as more than something good that must be preserved—it is something essential to spiritual survival. Spirit and matter work together as part of God's plan to redeem mankind.

Although I will look at O'Connor's work from a religious critical view, I have to say that O'Connor's criticism on her own work and on literature in general have been paramount to my own critical understanding and reading abilities. First of all, O'Connor was a formalist and a New Critic. She taught, "The intentions of the writer have to be found in the work itself, and not in his life" (*Mystery and Manners* 126). Therefore, meaning has to come primarily from studying formal elements within the story. She also held that "the meaning of a story has to be embodied in it, has to be made concrete in it. A story is a way to say something that can't be said any other way, and it takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is. When anybody asks what a story is about, the only proper thing is to tell him to read the story" (*Mystery and Manners* 96). I agree—the primary level of reading is built around artistic enjoyment and beauty. To try and reduce literary art to a pithy statement of meaning reduces that enjoyment and the experience of reading itself to a scientific experiment. Therefore, in my critical analysis, I hope to look at formal elements, like symbolism and natural imagery, with the hope of avoiding an oversimplification of what the story itself says the best. Within O'Connor's text there is a complex and imaginative unity, and by employing the formalist strategies of New Criticism, part of my critical plan is to study and reveal that unity in my thesis.

In another talk entitled “The Nature and Aim of Fiction,” O’Connor again addresses the purpose of art. She says, “art is writing something that is valuable in itself and that works in itself...It [this approach to art] eliminates any concern with the motivation of the writer except as this finds its place inside the work” (*Mystery and Manners* 65). Although O’Connor was essentially a New Critic (although not a formal member of the club), she also saw a connection between the author’s life and personal beliefs and the subject of his/her work. This applies to my study because I aim to show the deep connection between the writings and philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas and O’Connor’s thematic elements. In this way, I do believe there are elements outside the text itself which have implications on its meaning. In order to get the fullest and deepest understanding of the text, I believe it is helpful and many times essential to know what has gone on in the lives of authors and how they interact with their work.

O’Connor’s life and work are prime examples of the connections of an author’s life to her art. In agreement with O’Connor’s ideas, my plan is not to study her life as the primary contributor to meaning but as something that can definitely assist me in understanding her motives for writing about God’s grace, something which consistently appears in her work. O’Connor was a self-avowed Thomist who read deeply into Aquinas’ works and other Catholic authors influenced by him. Therefore, part of my thesis will focus on Flannery O’Connor’s Catholic upbringing and the importance her Christian vision played in her writing. To ignore the influence on the importance of a Catholic discourse in O’Connor’s life while seeking to comprehend her writing would be to miss the full meaning of her work. The Christian elements of her stories cannot be denied, whether one interprets them as Orthodox or not. It is important in a deep critical analysis of her work to look outside of the story into her Catholic beliefs. From St. Thomas and the Catholic Church, O’Connor came to believe in the mystery of how God fits into

the lives of humans through observable reality, how he reveals his grace through the natural world. O'Connor wrote about the importance of the Catholic belief system as one enlarging her creative outlook: "The Catholic writer, insofar as he has the mind of the Church, will feel life from the standpoint of the central Christian mystery: that it has, for all its horror, been found by God to be worth dying for. But this should enlarge, not narrow, his field of vision" (*Mystery and Manners* 146). O'Connor felt life in relation to her Christianity. This must have a bearing on the meaning of her work.

It could be said that overall, my analysis of O'Connor's *Everything That Rises Must Converge* will blend formalist and biographical critical practices, ones seemingly in opposition with one another. However, while making the work itself the primary object of study, I will use O'Connor's life as a commentary on meaning as well, thus making formalist and biographical elements work together to construct a more fully advanced analysis of the text. O'Connor taught the importance of considering a written work as a piece of art standing alone, while also making room for what inspires the writer to create that art, encompassing the importance of the art itself and the influences on the artist. I use the ideas behind Flannery O'Connor's critical writings addressing the study and nature of literature in order to write about her fictional work. Ultimately, in my thesis, her critical principles are employed to understand the grace behind "the black line of woods" in *Everything that Rises Must Converge*.

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Literary Thesis

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The “Black Line of Woods”: Sacramental Imagery in Flannery O’Connor’s *Everything that Rises
Must Converge*

Flannery O’Connor spent thirteen years of her adult life living and writing on her family’s farm in Georgia, Andalusia, where she was forced to live due to the debilitating disease lupus. During this time, her main concerns were her faith, her art, and her peafowl—most likely in that order. O’Connor’s artistic concerns encompassed what she saw to be the dilemma of modern man: how to live life in a nihilistic society, a society in which, according to O’Connor, “something is obviously lacking, where there is a general mystery of incompleteness and the particular tragedy of our own times to be demonstrated” (*Mystery and Manners* 167). O’Connor dealt with this tragedy through a Catholic vision, more specifically, a Thomist vision. In her Thomist view, God radiates his redemptive grace to man through natural, concrete reality, and man must realize this grace, perceptually and spiritually, as it is displayed through and around humanity. This connection is part of the great mystery of life.

Indeed, O’Connor’s writing is rooted in mystery, beginning with the great mystery found in Scripture, that of Christ’s incarnation. This is the mystery of life upon which O’Connor’s body of work centers, a mystery encompassing “the Divine life and our participation in it” (*MM* 111). She as a Catholic writer felt “life from the standpoint of the central Christian mystery: that it has, for all its horror, been found by God to be worth dying for” (*MM* 146). She learned the message of Christ in grade school through her Roman Catholic Catechism, the class in which she received

her highest grade. In her training, she methodically answered questions about how humans know God—"We learn to know, love, and serve God through Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who teaches us through the Catholic Church" (Gooch 32-33). No doubt she was taught the gospel message is a mysterious one. As St. Paul says, God has "made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ" (Eph. 1:9 NIV). This mystery, in O'Connor's Christian context, is not "merely that which is baffling and mysterious, an enigma or insoluble problem. A mystery is, on the contrary, 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" (Ware qtd. in Wood 24). The mystery of the incarnation is both concrete in the humanity of Christ but abstract in the belief that He is also God. It is both evident and impossible to comprehend. O'Connor's characters must face this mystery, one which does not narrow down an answer, but instead enlarges the spiritual vision of the blinded men and women confronted by God.

O'Connor also confronts the dilemma that men and women are "ever seeing but never perceiving" the mystery surrounding them (Mark 4:12 NIV). Blinded by the "distortions" of the modern world, they must be shocked into realizing this mystery. The artist with "Christian concerns...may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience...you have to make your vision apparent to shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures" (*MM* 33-34).

O'Connor shocks both her readers and her characters with her "large and startling figures," and these images are where my study begins. They are most often images from the natural world, the medium O'Connor uses to illustrate how God fits into the lives of humans, how the physical connects to the spiritual, and how humanity discovers truth through recognizing, if not always

receiving, grace. O'Connor's use of natural imagery is demonstrative of this connection, how clues in the natural world lead to the mystery of grace. Although the working of grace is evident in most of O'Connor's work, it especially finds a material presence in her last collection, *Everything that Rises Must Converge*. It is in this work that O'Connor uses a familiar element of her life at Andalusia, a distant tree line, as the presence and vehicle of grace in the natural world. This tree line appears repeatedly in the background of several stories, sometimes taking a central role, while at other times making a more subtle appearance. Its occurrence is O'Connor's incarnational stamp on *Everything that Rises Must Converge*, a symbol of Christ's spiritual and material presence in the lives of humans.

A quick survey of the presence of this tree line in *Everything That Rises Must Converge* demonstrates its prominence as a part of O'Connor's dramatic range. In "Greenleaf," Mrs. May is confronted by a "black wall of trees," (37) and a sky "crossed with thin red and purple bars" (45); she notices "the sun trying to burn through the tree line" (47). In "A View of the Woods," the Fortune farm is surrounded by a "sullen line of black pine woods" (69), woods that the Pitts' family cherishes, but that appear to Mr. Fortune as "hellish red trunks [rising] up in a black wood" (71). These "gaunt trees...thickened into mysterious dark files" (81) take center stage as the key to understanding spiritual mystery. These same "black woods that surrounded Timberboro...cast a strange light" (82) over the young intellectual Asbury in "The Enduring Chill." The presence of the "tree line...black against the crimson sky" (114) precedes the descent of the Holy Ghost and Asbury's chilling revelation. Spiritual truth descends on Ruby Turpin in "Revelation," as she is surrounded by a "far tree line" (214) where she absorbs "abysmal life-giving knowledge" (217) and experiences an epiphany of her spiritual worth as a member of God's family. It is a single, burning tree in "Parker's Back" that acts as a catalyst to Parker's

recognition of Christ. Here, he is confronted by “a large, old tree...reaching out to grasp him” (232), spurring him to “leap forward into a worse unknown” (233).

Flannery O'Connor's Thomist perspective connects deeply to her use of the physical world in *Everything that Rises Must Converge*. She believed “when fiction is made according to its nature, it should reinforce our sense of the supernatural by grounding it in concrete, observable reality. If the writer uses his eyes in the real security of his Faith, he will be obliged to use them honestly, and his sense of mystery, and acceptance of it, will be increased” (*MM* 148). This philosophy, that natural or concrete surroundings are God's way of revealing himself to humanity, is a staple of Thomism. Indeed, O'Connor was a self-avowed Thomist, a follower of the philosophy of the medieval Christian theologian, St. Thomas Aquinas. Never straying from her Catholic upbringing, O'Connor customarily read from St. Thomas at least twenty minutes before going to bed at night, and, as a result, much of Aquinas' philosophy of art and spirituality become a part of O'Connor's writing (Gooch. In a letter to a friend, O'Connor wrote of Aquinas: “I feel I can personally guarantee that St. Thomas loved God because for the life of me I cannot help loving St. Thomas” (*The Habit of Being* 94). Much of her fiction comes from a traditional Thomist belief that God, the powerful Creator, is interested in the human race and its salvation through His offered grace. This preoccupation with grace many scholars have noted in her fiction, and no doubt was influenced by O'Connor's habitual study of Aquinas.

Therefore, before looking at how O'Connor's Thomism is realized in *Everything that Rises Must Converge*, it is important to understand the general teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas. O'Connor uses a Thomist system of thought as a way to understand what she saw as her modernist, nihilistic society. The major tenet of Thomism is the unity of the natural world and the spiritual world. Unlike Gnosticism and Manichaeism, which understand the spiritual and

natural world to be totally separate. Thomism sees nature as a theater for the spiritual. The unification of the natural and spiritual world rests on the foundation of Thomism – that God is the creator, the first cause of all that is. As the Supreme Creator, God sustains His creation through providential grace. As Aquinas states: “There is providence in God, since God has created every good that exists in things...not only in the substance of things, but also in their ordination to an end” (*Nature and Grace* 93). God, therefore, is present in the natural world both as its creator and as the being that upholds, infuses, and perfects all things with his grace. Also, according to Aquinas, “grace does not abolish nature but brings it to perfection” (*Summa Theologiae* 15). He adds to this: “Grace alone makes God exist in things in a unique way” (*Summa* 84). A Thomist scholar read by O’Connor summarizes this concept: “Because He is the supreme Act-of-Being, God is everywhere present and acting by His efficacy. He is intimately present in the very *esse* [essence] whose operation proceeds from creatures. He supports them. He animates them from within” (Gilson 180). The natural world is not just God’s creation and possession, but also a stage for displaying His grace. God dramatizes His grace through His hierarchy of angels, man, animals, and even plant life.

Another important way to understand O’Connor’s Thomism is through sacramental theology. O’Connor was a strong supporter of the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist. She defended the Host against a purely symbolic meaning. She felt so strongly about the literal nature of Communion that when confronted with the contrary, she replied, “Well, if it’s a symbol, to hell with it” (*IIB* 125). O’Connor furthers this point in her essay “Novelist and Believer”: “When Emerson decided, in 1832, that he could no longer celebrate the Lord’s supper unless the bread and wine were removed, an important step in the vaporization of religion in America was taken, and the spirit of that step has continued apace. When the physical

fact is separated from the spiritual reality, the dissolution of belief is eventually inevitable" (*MM* 161-62). This statement "affirms both a clear distinction and unity between the physical substances of bread and wine and their symbolic significance. It emphasizes the material elements in the doctrine of real presence as distinct from the idea of Christ's presence purely as a sign" (Desmond 145). The natural elements of bread and wine are in union with the spiritual element of sacrificial grace. This theological principle, articulated by St. Thomas, is illustrative of the way grace is present in nature. Therefore, natural things take on a deeper, sacramental quality, both in O'Connor's theology and in her art. She understood that the "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" (*MM* 157).

O'Connor believed that Modernism separated faith from science, and therefore, the spiritual from the physical. This modern heresy was little more than the Gnosticism of the second century, and according to O'Connor, found its way into twentieth century fiction in which "a meaningless, absurd world impinges upon the sacred consciousness of author or character: author and character seldom now go out to explore and penetrate a world in which the sacred is reflected" (*MM* 158). Susan Srigley, in her study of O'Connor's "incarnational art," states why O'Connor saw this as dangerous to humanity's knowledge of God: "Either the spiritual experience is drawn wholly into the human, initiated and exhausted in its meaning by human needs and ends; or an external, divine being is seen as separate from the human and, because of this separation, is ultimately unable to penetrate human life and be known sacramentally in the world" (21). Modernism, like Gnosticism, is unable to connect the physical and spiritual. However, according to O'Connor, this leads to a way of thinking and an art that are contrary to reality. It removes the spiritual from the material, ultimately leaving man spiritually imbalanced.

Not only did O'Connor see this heresy in the academy, but also in the Protestant fundamentalists of the South, whose sole focus on the salvation of souls excluded the body or the material. O'Connor's artistic and Catholic sensibility fought against what she called, "the Protestant temper—approaching the spiritual directly instead of through matter" (*HB* 304). Instead, the spiritual and physical world should work together in all aspects of life—mystery and manners, reason and imagination, nature and grace. Rather than separate, distinct forces, they are two parts of the same whole. To reject the body is ultimately to reject the Incarnation of Christ and the Church itself.

While O'Connor's use of imagery is shaped by her theology, she expresses her ideas in ways a theological treatise could never do. O'Connor fleshes out the theology of Karl Barth, St. Thomas Aquinas, her Catechism, and even the Scriptures. She aims at truth, but that truth is absorbed through her imaginative vision and narrative voice, rather than theological axioms. O'Connor "selects every detail for a reason, every incident for a reason...and demonstrates something that cannot possibly be demonstrated any other way than with a whole novel [or short story]" (*MM* 75). O'Connor's Christian concerns connect closely to her art, not with the sentimental methods she scorns in many of her essays, but in a dramatic manner just as mysterious and shocking as the God she contemplates.

The channeling of God's grace through the natural world is not is not a new concept in the criticism surrounding O'Connor's work, and my study of O'Connor's use of natural imagery fits into a wide context of those who have studied her writing from its Thomist perspective. Two works that also see spiritual mystery as the background to O'Connor's use of natural imagery are Ralph C. Wood's *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South* and Susan Srigley's *Flannery O'Connor's Incarnational Art*. Wood looks at how O'Connor's life in the South, a

region strongly rooted in Christian ethics and imagery, formed the instruments of her dramatic vision. Wood's work influences mine in two main ways. First, although avoiding the reduction of O'Connor's stories to simple statements of religious theme or Sunday school maxims, he does recognize O'Connor's art as an attempt to display spiritual truth in order to shock the Church and Modern society. Secondly, Wood points to the influence of concrete images and physical experience on O'Connor's Roman Catholic spiritual vision, a vision directly influenced, ironically enough, by a Protestant, yet still Bible-centered South. In this Bible Belt, O'Connor found common ground in regards to biblical knowledge, giving southerners "concrete ties to the universal and the holy which allow the meaning of their every action to be heightened and seen under the aspect of eternity" (*MM* 203). Wood centers much of his commentary on O'Connor's belief in the sacramental displays of grace and does it by showing her affinity with the radically religious South, a region where people were still willing and able to recognize Christ in the trees.

Srigley's book focuses intently on O'Connor's use of sacramental imagery as it relates directly to Thomistic theology. My argument agrees with the one she makes in her first chapter, "Sacramental Theology and Incarnational Art," because it looks at the danger O'Connor saw in the separation of the spiritual and physical and thus her attempt to rejoin nature and grace through the use of the corporeal world. Srigley also sees O'Connor's art from an incarnational perspective: "Fiction is an incarnational art because it offers a concrete representation of life and human existence in the facts of the story, but within these representations it can also reveal spiritual mysteries and meaning. Meaning, in this sense, is not disembodied in fiction as abstracted principles or ideas but is always incarnate" (17). This overarching philosophy forms the basis for my argument—O'Connor's artistic vision and her art itself are, at the core, concerned with physical representations of spiritual truth. My argument differs from Srigley's

chapter because she mainly studies O'Connor's prose in *Mystery and Manners*, which she views as key to a better understanding of O'Connor's sacramental theology in her art. I, however, focus on the imagery in her fiction as the embodiment of her theology.

Various analyses stem from perceiving O'Connor's art as bearing a sacramental stamp and should be mentioned in context to my proposal. Shannon Russell's critical essay, "Space and the Movement through Space in *Everything that Rises Must Converge*," maps out O'Connor's use of physical space as a source of divine revelation. She notices, "The space within and through which O'Connor's people move is neither empty nor meaningless, but rather filled with mystery" (81). Russell outlines O'Connor's use of journey, isolation, and particularly relevant to my study, the "large spaces of pasture land often enclosed by a distant wall of trees" (82). She, however, sees the wall of tree in the distance as representative "of the distance he [man] must travel to reach the infinite" (Russell 83). Although I agree with Russell's main argument, that the physical world reveals spiritual mystery, I focus more intently on trees, particularly a tree line, as a direct source of grace, either as a physical sign of Christ, or of God's voice to humanity.

John F. Desmond's "Flannery O'Connor and the Symbol" relates O'Connor's use of the symbolic to her Catholic interest in the Eucharist as the ultimate Catholic symbol and, like Russell, shows O'Connor's art to be based in sacramental theology. According to Desmond, her use of symbol "is literal, understanding literal to mean a concrete detail that points to or helps to reveal the essence of a thing or action, essence being its deepest and ultimately mysterious reality, which is linked to the sources of being itself" (148). Desmond shows, specifically in a study of "The Enduring Chill," how O'Connor's literal, concrete details are manifestations of God based in Christ's literal presence in Communion.

John Roos reads O'Connor from a Thomistic perspective in his article "The Political in Flannery O'Connor: A Reading of 'A View of the Woods.'" He looks at the story's sacramental and Thomist qualities as an alternative to a political interpretation of the work. According to this theological reading, Mr. Fortune and Mary Grace's woods are the means to an encounter with the supernatural. Dennis Patrick Slattery reads O'Connor's "Parker's Back" from a similar perspective in his article "Faith in Search of an Image: The Iconic Dimension of Flannery O'Connor's 'Parker's Back.'" Here, Slattery focuses on Parker's tattoos as an exploration of "how an individual learns to focus his moral vision on the visible creation in order to apprehend, if even for an instant, the invisible presence of the Creator by means of grace" (120). My study fits into the work discussed here as it continues to look at O'Connor's imagery from a Thomist perspective. However, instead of focusing solely on one story, my aim is to comprehensively discuss the occurrence of natural imagery as it appears in the stories of *Everything that Rises Must Converge*. Also, while many authors focus either on the physical imagery in O'Connor's work or on the spiritual meaning in her stories, my aim is to deal with both the physical and spiritual elements in her work and show how they are equally important to an understanding of O'Connor's art.

A survey concerning the natural order in O'Connor's *Everything that Rises Must Converge* begins with a selection containing the most obvious use of sacramental imagery, "A View of the Woods." A first reading reveals the evils of greedily destroying nature for the sake of economic and industrial growth. The aptly named protagonist, Mr. Fortune, is a man whose connection to nature is tossed aside for "progress, which had always been his ally. He was not one of those old people who fight improvement, who object to everything new and cringe at every change. He wanted to see a paved highway in front of his house with plenty of new-model

cars on it..." (*Everything that Rises Must Converge* 57). Mr. Fortune detests anyone who would interfere with the destruction of nature on the path to more important things—supermarkets and gas stations. His prideful, blind yearning for the industrial becomes his tragic flaw leading, of course, to death. His last view in the physical world is of "one huge yellow monster...gorging itself on clay" (*Everything* 81). A cold, inanimate machine is the only thing left to comfort Mr. Fortune in his death.

A Romantic or environmental analysis of this story depicts nature as superior to technology, something closer to the human's natural, pure state, and therefore more spiritually fulfilling. Nature is the provider of insight to the human soul, and as such, should be preserved. When nature falls prey to urbanization, humanity will degenerate into its more base instincts, having nothing with which to guide itself. However, O'Connor's use of nature in this story goes beyond an environmental message to a deeper mystery. "A View of the Woods" reveals a sacramental understanding, which moves past the simple reading that nature is good and should be preserved. Rather, nature is appreciated and displayed as a vessel of God's grace.

Mystery directly approaches Mr. Fortune, a man who ignores God's natural creation in favor of what he believes to be a superior industrialism. He is the typical "modern man who recognizes spirit in himself but who fails to recognize a being outside himself whom he can adore as Creator and Lord...For him, man has his own natural spirit of courage and dignity and pride and must consider it a point of honor to be satisfied with this" (*MM* 159). John Roos calls this trait in Fortune "Lockean, in which individualism and the pursuit of 'life, liberty, and estate' serve as an alternative to salvation" (161). This pursuit of progress and intense pride in Fortune leads him to embrace progress at any cost, but this "man of advanced vision" (*Everything* 58) blinds himself to a grace offered through nature.

The story begins and ends with symbols of progress. Fortune and his granddaughter, Mary Fortune, find entertainment in watching a bulldozer make way for new buildings: "He [Fortune] sat on the bumper and Mary Fortune straddled the hood and they watched, sometimes for hours, while the machine systematically ate a square red hole in what had once been a cow pasture" (*Everything* 54-55). This same machine is described as a "big disembodied gullet gorg[ing] itself on the clay, then, with the sound of a deep sustained nausea and a slow mechanical revulsion, turn[ing] and spit[ting] it up" (*Everything* 55). The machine is monstrous, destructive, and greedy, similar to Fortune himself. The artificial mechanism, here opposing nature, ultimately stands in the way of God's grace for Fortune.

Fortune's stubborn autonomy, an impediment to grace, proves itself in the selfish control of his property. His land is a way of lording authority over his son-in-law, Pitts. "What Pitts made went to Pitts but the land belonged to Fortune and he was careful to keep the fact before them" (*Everything* 56). Fortune finds satisfaction in making Pitts "feel his hand" (*Everything* 62). As he and Mary Fortune routinely watch the bulldozer eat the land, he reveals his latest plan to frustrate Pitts: "I'm going to sell the lot right in front of the house for a gas station... Then we won't have to go down the road to get the car filled up, just step out the front door" (*Everything* 62-63). He expects Mary Fortune to be thrilled about the "bonus" he will give her after the sale; instead, she is bewildered: "You mean...the lawn?" (*Everything* 63).

This resistance on her part is shocking to Fortune and reveals their different views of the woods. Mary Fortune has always been his compatriot and a reflection of himself, the grandchild in which he took great pride. She is "short and broad like himself, with his very light blue eyes, his wide prominent forehead, his stead penetrating scowl and his rich florid complexion; but she was like him on the inside too. She had, to a singular degree, his intelligence, his strong will, and

his push and drive" (*Everything* 55). Fortune has no respect for anyone in his family but Mary Fortune; he looks forward to the day when she will inherit his land and thus have power over her family members. He cannot believe Mary Fortune's sentimental reaction to the sale of the "lawn." How could his intelligent and spirited granddaughter resist progress? Roos argues that according to Fortune's view of life, "any claim that there are natural obligations other than to self and the calculating 'law of nature' is a threat to the future of one's personal freedom and progress" (164).

More importantly, Fortune is outraged by Mary Fortune's markedly different view of the woods. She protests her grandfather's decision to sell the two hundred feet of land in front of the house: "That's where we play...We won't be able to see the woods across the road...We won't be able to see the view...We won't be able to see the woods from the porch...My daddy grazes his calves on that lot" (*Everything* 63). Later, Mary Fortune escapes her grandfather to contemplate the woods: "She stared across the lot where there was nothing but a profusion of pink and yellow and purple weeds, and on across the road, to the sullen line of black pine woods fringed on top with green. Behind that line was a narrow gray-blue line of more distant woods and beyond that nothing but the sky...She looked into this scene as if it were a person that she preferred to him [Fortune]" (*Everything* 69-70). Mary Fortune sees the practical importance of the field; it's used for the calves. But her view goes beyond this to a spiritual understanding of the woods, one her grandfather cannot understand. Shannon Russell notices this contrast between the childlike faith of Mary Fortune and the cynicism of her grandfather: "Imagination and faith are necessary for the perception of the infinite in the finite or the mystery in the concrete...she [Mary Fortune] sees through it to spiritual mystery" (86). The woods are a place of comfort and escape, where she runs after being beaten by her father. She hangs onto the trees while getting

whipped and cries under them afterwards. When confronted with Mary Fortune's continued resistance to the sale of the land, Fortune loses his temper: "I never have seen you act in such a way before... There's not a thing over there but the woods... You act more like a Pitts than a Fortune" (*Everything* 70). He sees only the surface value of nature—a material means of power and progress; he cannot comprehend Mary Fortune's distress. To Fortune, "a pine trunk is a pine trunk" (*Everything* 70).

Although Fortune chooses to ignore it, the "line of black pine woods" is assigned spiritual significance in this story. As sensed by Mary Fortune, these woods are an offering of God's grace. In the beginning of the story, the woods are described this way: "The red corrugated lake eased up to within fifty feet of the construction and was bordered on the other side by a black line of woods which appeared at both ends of the view to walk across the water and continue along the edge of the fields" (*Everything* 54). Later, they are described as being "bathed in blood" (*Everything* 71). This imagery resembles that of the crucifixion, the offering of the body and blood of Christ, the ultimate means of grace. In this Christ-like imagery, the Thomist union of nature and grace materializes. The trees, a part of God's natural creation, are at the same time charged with the grace of God. It is up to the characters to either accept or reject this grace.

Fortune, even after given a special vision of grace through nature, rejects it for money and recognition. While contemplating Mary Fortune's view of the woods, Fortune experiences a revealing vision:

The third time he got up to look at the woods, it was almost six o'clock and the gaunt trunks appeared to be raised in a pool of red light that gushed from the almost hidden sun setting behind them. The old man stared for some time, as if

for a prolonged instant he were caught up out of the rattle of everything that led to the future and were held there in the midst of an uncomfortable mystery that he had not apprehended before. He saw it, in his hallucination, as if someone were wounded behind the woods and the trees were bathed in blood. After a few minutes this unpleasant vision was broken by the presence of Pitts' pick-up truck grinding to a halt below the window. He returned to his bed and shut his eyes and against the closed lids hellish red trunks rose up in a black wood. (*Everything* 71)

Fortune views nature with a spiritual eye and is hit with a sacred mystery; in this fusion between natural and supernatural, he has a sacramental vision. This vision of a wounded Christ and his blood, offered again through the trees, is broken by the sound of a machine. In this instant, Fortune forgets the sacramental display of grace, and the trees that were "bathed in blood" become "hellish red trunks." Fortune "shuts his eyes" to the mystery he's experienced and chooses a detrimental path.

Shortly after his "hallucination," Fortune begins to remind himself of the advantages of selling the front lot, thus blocking the view of the woods from the house forever. He remains unchanged in his mission to look "over the lake to the woods across it and...instead of woods, there would be houses and stores and parking places, and the credit for it could go largely to him" (*Everything* 65). Fortune wastes no time in going to meet the prospective buyer, Tilman, "a man of quick action and few words. He sat habitually with his arms folded on the counter and his insignificant head weaving snake-fashion about them...His eyes were green and very narrow and his tongue was always exposed in his partly opened mouth" (*Everything* 76). Just as the trees are Christ-like, the man who will obstruct the trees is described in the image of the serpent, the great deceiver, Satan. Fortune makes a deal with the devil and loses his soul in the bargain.

Since Fortune and Mary Fortune react differently to the substance of grace, there is eventually a confrontation of wills. Mary Fortune rebels so strongly against the selling of the land that Fortune has to drag her “wheezing and whimpering” to the car. This leads to an inevitable conflict between Fortune and Mary Fortune:

She was on him so quickly that he could not have recalled which blow he felt first, whether the weight of her whole solid body or the jabs of her feet or the pummeling of her fist on his chest. He flailed the belt in the air, not knowing where to hit but trying to get her off him until he could decide where to get a grip on her...with horror he saw her face rise up in front of his jaw. He seemed to see his own face coming to bite him from several sides at once....The old man looked up into his own image. It was triumphant and hostile. ‘You been whipped,’ it said, ‘by me...and I’m PURE Pitts.’ (*Everything* 79-80)

Fortune sees a side of himself in Mary Fortune he hates to acknowledge. He is horrified that Mary Fortune would deny a connection to him. She has always been his partner, the one family member whose spirit and pride, so much like his, has been his comfort. However, Mary Fortune and the rest of her family see something in the trees that Fortune himself has chosen to deny. Just as he ignored his vision earlier in the story, he rages against any hindrance to the development of his land. In his fury and with a “sudden surge of strength, he managed to roll over and reverse their positions so that he was looking down into the face that was his own but had dared to call itself Pitts. With his hands still tight around her neck, he lifted her head and brought it down once hard against the rock that happened to be under it....He said, ‘There’s not an ounce of Pitts in me’” (*Everything* 80). When Fortune kills his granddaughter, his mirror image, the one who glimpsed the mystery of grace, he also destroys himself.

Fortune's ultimate refusal of grace rests in the murder of his granddaughter. Unlike many of O'Connor's characters who experience a shocking revelation leading to an acceptance of grace, in his death, Fortune realizes he has denied the grace displayed through nature. As his heart beats out of control,

the old man felt as if he were being pulled after it through the woods....He perceived that there would be a little opening there, a little place where he could escape and leave the woods behind him....He realized suddenly that he could not swim....On both sides of him he saw that the gaunt trees had thickened into mysterious dark files that were marching across the water and away into the distance. He looked around desperately for someone to help him but the place was deserted except for one huge yellow monster, which sat to the side, as stationary as he was, gorging itself on clay. (*Everything* 80-81)

Fortune has already decided to accept nature merely as a channel to his own wealth; he rejects the revelation of something above and beyond himself. To acknowledge grace through nature would have meant change, submission to something larger than his own will. Also, he cannot comprehend a world beyond the physical one he sees, and the mystery of how God interacts with man is just out of his reach. In the end, there is nothing to save him in his death. Nature's grace has deserted him, and he finds that ultimately, his machines cannot rescue him.

"A View of the Woods" plays a major role in the "incarnational art" of *Everything that Rises Must Converge*, a collection whose core is *the* Incarnation of Christ. O'Connor's use of environmental imagery brings to light spiritual mystery by "connecting two points—one point visible to the reader through language that name[s] the natural, sensible world; the other point invisible, but no less real" (Desmond 147). For Fortune and Mary Fortune, the visible is the tree

line, and the invisible is grace. The view of the woods is not just nature needing to be preserved but a means of grace offered to both characters. This sacrament is accepted by Mary Fortune and rejected by Fortune. One dies with a realization of grace and the other with a vision of its destruction.

The line of woods appears again in "Greenleaf." In this story, Mrs. May's farm is guarded by "a black wall of trees with a sharp sawtooth edge that held off the indifferent sky" (*Everything* 37). This wall of trees provides a feeling of security for Mrs. May, but in the end, it is a conduit for violent grace in the form of a bull. Mrs. May is a woman whose Southern sense of propriety causes her to adopt a view of the world in which religion and Christ are good for people as long as they are kept inside the walls of the church. She takes pride in her land and her hard work, which she feels is hindered by her sons, the Greenleafs, and the bull who roams freely in her yard. She becomes fixated with the presence of this bull on her farm.

She had been aware that whatever it was had been eating as long as she had had the place and had eaten everything from the beginning of her fence line up to the house and now was eating the house and calmly and with the same steady rhythm would continue through the house, eating her and her boys, and then on, eating everything but the Greenleafs, on and on, eating everything until nothing was left but the Greenleafs on a little island all their own in the middle of what had been her place. (*Everything* 25)

Mrs. May is afraid of the bull and how it might ruin her dairy cows. It is also of what the bull reminds her that Mrs. May is ultimately concerned—the success of the Greenleaf boys. Mrs. May's strict Southern manners are bothered that this family she considers "white trash" have found success. Her own sons, however, while well-educated, continue to live at home with her.

The only trait they share is “that neither of them cared what happened on the place” (*Everything* 28).

Mrs. Greenleaf’s bizarre religious expressions are especially offensive to Mrs. May’s southern code of conduct. She is disgusted with Mrs. Greenleaf’s “redneck” behavior in general—her daughter’s tobacco use, their family’s dirty clothes and trashy yard. But she is most of all offended by Mrs. Greenleaf’s “prayer healing.”

Every day she cut all the morbid stories out of the newspaper—the accounts of women who had been raped and criminals who had escaped and children who had been burned and of train wrecks and plane crashes and the divorce of movie stars. She took these to the woods and dug a hole and buried them and mumbled and groaned for an hour or so, moving her huge arms back and forth under her and out again and finally just lying flat and, Mrs. May suspected, going to sleep in the dirt. (*Everything* 30)

Mrs. May is upset by this outrageously fundamental southern Christian, herself a woman “with a large respect for religion, though she did not, of course, believe any of it was true” (*Everything* 31). She seeks to fit into a picture of southern gentility and attempts to hang on to her pride while surrounded by what she believes to be ignorant, religiously over-zealous “hicks.” Religion is one thing, but groveling in the dirt expecting answers to prayer is another. Going to church “is but her civic duty, and church is a place where she hopes her sons will meet ‘nice’ girls. Jesus is a figure of such public embarrassment that his name, like the words for sex, should be kept private. Cleanliness is not only next to godliness but actually superior to it” (Wood 89). Mrs. May fears losing control of her boys and of her farm. According to Tuck McFarland, in her story, “the mysterious, chthonic forces of nature are symbols of divinity, and Mrs. May’s relentless

resistance to these forces suggests that the primary convergence she is attempting to avoid is union with God...Mrs. May's fears of the bull and the Greenleafs represent her anxiety about the intrusion of that which is vaster than she into her well-controlled life" (45). Truly believing in the action of God's grace in the world does not fit into Mrs. May's scope of reality and her life of self-reliant pride.

Although Mrs. Greenleaf is clearly a use of O'Connor's grotesque, her genuine faith makes Mrs. May's "polite" religion weak. She hides nothing and pretends nothing, unlike Mrs. May, whose life goal is to paint a picture of herself as a respectable Southern woman, complete with a successful business and family. She is, however, self-deluded. What lifts her above the status of her farmhands (at least in her own eyes) is her life of hard work and decent behavior. She tricks herself and develops a superiority complex by taking pride in small successes, in keeping the Greenleafs and her sons under her thumb and always taking charge. In reality, she has no control over her farm or her family.

In Mrs. May's story, the line of woods surrounding her farm combines with violence and the supernatural in a truly shocking manner in order to break her of religious and social pride. Her "life of unrelenting labor...has been twisted into a proud denial of divine grace" (Wood 89). When Mrs. May is confronted by nature, she can no longer reject truth but must stare it down face to face. Her confrontation with reality begins in a dream. Between sleeping and waking, Mrs. May hears a grinding noise:

She became aware after a time that this noise was the sun trying to burn through the tree line and she stopped to watch, safe in the knowledge that it couldn't, that it had to sink the way it always did outside of her property. When she first stopped it was a swollen red ball, but as she stood watching it began to narrow

and pale until it looked like a bullet. Then suddenly it burst through the tree line and raced down the hill toward her. (*Everything* 47)

What is actually the Greenleaf's bull chewing the shrubs outside her window Mrs. May subconsciously equates with the encroachment of her natural surroundings. The tree line of her dreams is not statically and safely surrounding her farm. It is letting in light, a light she isn't quite ready to acknowledge. While she thought the trees were a barrier to "the indifferent sky," they have become a gateway for grace.

As Mrs. May pursues the bull in order to kill it, she is conquered by it instead. She faces a violent realization. It is a devastation O'Connor felt was necessary for these types of characters steeped so far in their own pride: "I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work" (*MM* 112). The bull, emerging from the tree line, "buried his head in her lap, like a wild tormented lover, before her expression changed...She continued to stare straight ahead but the entire scene in front of her changed" (*Everything* 52). Although the bull's thrust into Mrs. May's lap may be read primarily as a representation of her sexual awakening (indeed, there is no doubt about the sexual connotations of this story), it is the dissemination of moral and spiritual truth which takes precedence. The bull literally turns Mrs. May's world and scope of vision upside down. In this way, "she discovers that the world is bounded by the infinite sky belonging to the infinite God" (Wood 90). In the bull's violent charge of death, Mrs. May is opened to life-giving knowledge—she is not the owner of her own soul and body; rather, something much bigger and more mysterious has taken over.

Mrs. May's perception changes; instead of seeing an "indifferent" sky, she encounters the heavens as they "declare the glory of God" (Psalm 8:1 NIV). In her topsy-turvy vision, she sees

“the tree line was a dark wound in a world that was nothing but sky—and she had the look of a person whose sight has been suddenly restored but who finds the light unbearable” (*Everything* 52). The biblical picture of Christ is undeniable here. Mrs. May has seen a vision akin to Isaiah’s—“and by his wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5 NIV). She has been restored to sight by recognizing the “light of men,” the “true light that gives light to every man” (John 1:4, 9 NIV). The tree line, once keeping Mrs. May seemingly secure, comes close and takes part in disclosing an agonizing truth, but possibly saving truth. Mrs. May dies while “whispering some last discovery into the animal’s ear” (*Everything* 53). Again, the image of the tree line plays a central role in revealing the mystery of grace and truth. This mysterious presence is part of O’Connor’s incarnational art, a natural revelation of Christ found in the bloody tree line.

In “Revelation,” truth is once again violently revealed to a Southern woman whose pride is centered on what she believes to be her elevated position in society. In Ruby the reader observes a present day Pharisee who hypocritically sees other’s weaknesses while ignoring any of her own. She believes in God and knows her actions in the present life have consequences in the next. However, her spiritual vanity fools her into thinking she is at the top of the social and spiritual hierarchy with which she is so concerned.

Most of this story takes place in the doctor’s office where Ruby has taken her husband for treatment. The description of Ruby’s entrance into the waiting room is representative of her character: “Mrs. Turpin, who was very large, made it look even smaller by her presence. She stood looming at the head of the magazine table set in the center of it....Her little bright black eyes took in all the patients as she sized up the seating situation” (*Everything* 191). Her superior presence takes over much of the room as she immediately begins to evaluate the other patients in

respect to herself. The levels of society represented in the waiting room mirror Mrs. Turpin's nighttime ritual:

Sometimes [she] occupied herself at night naming the classes of people. On the bottom of the heap were most colored people, not the kind she would have been if she had been one, but most of them; then next to them—not above, just away from—were the white-trash; then above them were the home-owners, and above them the home-and-land owners, to which she and Claud belonged. Above she and Claud were people with a lot of money and much bigger houses and much more land” (*Everything* 195).

Mrs. Turpin has composed a rigid social structure, and through it she displays a dangerous racism and bigotry veiled by an insincere charity. She helps those she considers to be poor “white trash,” but is unwilling to admit they are equal to her as human beings. Her arrogance extends even to the praise of the hogs on her farm: “Our hogs are not dirty and they don’t stink... They’re cleaner than some children I’ve seen. Their feet never touch the ground. We have a pig-parlor—that’s where you raise them on concrete” (*Everything* 198). Mrs. Turpin’s exchanges in the doctor’s office reveal a small-mindedness fostered by the pride she takes in her clean behavior and good disposition. Her self-satisfaction becomes most apparent in a hymn of thanksgiving to God: “Her heart rose. [God] had not made her a nigger or white-trash or ugly! He had made her herself and given her a little of everything. Jesus, thank you! she said. Thank you thank you thank you” (*Everything* 203). O’Connor uses satire here to amplify the ridiculous nature of Mrs. Turpin’s false praise. In Mrs. Turpin, there is definitely an echo of the Pharisee’s prayer in the New Testament: “God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers,

evildoers, adulterers" (Luke 18:11 NIV). Her most prized possession is her righteousness. She praises herself and becomes her own god.

Ruby, however, suffers a saving realization of her own ignorance and fallibility, but it is a cruel humiliation that prevents her from continuing in her inflated sense of self-worth. Her disgrace is the result of disturbing events occurring in her nicely ordered world. Much like Mrs. May's experience in "Greenleaf", these events are violent and physical representations meant to shake Ruby out of her ignorance. The shock is felt at the hands of Mary Grace who can no longer endure Ruby's hypocrisy and decides to end her ridiculous and hypocritical utterances by viciously hurling her textbook across the room, hitting Ruby squarely in the left eye. Thereafter, she tackles Ruby onto the ground and whispers a strange and shocking revelation: "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog" (*Everything* 207). Although hurtful, this outburst is not lost on Ruby, a woman who believes in God's communication with man. It haunts her, and she cannot find peace under this curse.

Later, at her farm, Ruby boldly challenges God to give her answers, again arrogantly struggling against being humbled. It is in her anger, frustration, and questioning of God that the tree line makes its appearance. While Ruby marches in anger to her prized pig parlor, the narrator describes the sun as "riding westward very fast over the far tree line as if it meant to reach the hogs before she did" (*Everything* 214). The farm itself is surrounded by "a dark green dusty wood...The sun was behind the wood, very red, looking over the paling of trees like a farmer inspecting his own hogs" (*Everything* 215). It is to these surroundings that Ruby shouts her confusion aloud to God: "What do you send me a message like that for...How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell too...Why me?" She rumbled. "It's no trash around here, black or white, that I haven't given to. And break my back to the bone every day working.

And do for the church.' ... 'Who do you think you are?'" (*Everything* 215). The answer to her question "returned to her clearly like an answer from the wood" (*Everything* 215). Seconds later, Ruby gazes at her hogs who seem "to pant with a secret life. Until the sun slipped finally behind the tree line, Mrs. Turpin remained there with her gaze bent to them as if she were absorbing some abysmal life-giving knowledge" (*Everything* 217). Essentially, truth and grace come racing toward Ruby through the woods. They are infused with a red light, another Christ-like image Ruby cannot ignore. According to Raiger, this "struggle of Mrs. Turpin's will against full self-realization of the true state of her soul becomes a struggle against the grace of God's mercy... This struggle is drawn in the allegorical signification of the hogs on her farm internalized as a form of self-knowledge, and in the landscape of the sublime, seen through its emptiness to a revelation of God's saving grace" (242). Finally, in these surroundings, Ruby comes to an understanding through an experience with the natural world around her:

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 niggers 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.

(*Everything* 217-18)

Ruby's self-satisfied devotion is overturned at this realization of the way God works in the lives of humans. All people are equal before God because the transgression of humanity requires that all depend on God for power and salvation. There is in fact no hierarchy of souls. In the end Ruby hears echoes of true thanksgiving, not for God's favor to just a few but for his mercy to all: "In the woods around her the invisible cricket choruses had struck up, but what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah" (*Everything* 218). Ruby comes to knowledge when the natural and spiritual world unite and work together to infuse grace into her life. Although Ruby's life after this is not seen, the reader believes she has found some personal truth and spiritual truth, and "the first product of [her] self-knowledge is humility" (*MM* 35).

The humiliation of a character occurs again in "The Enduring Chill" as the young intellectual Asbury struggles with a compromise of power between his own intelligence and the idea of a Divine truth. He is a young man who has renounced a higher wisdom and has placed confidence in his own reason and ability, a truly modern intellectual. Asbury's intellect, not his social status, is the source of his pride. However, he has a problem turning his ideas into art and producing anything of worth. O'Connor describes him as "a wretched young man [who] arrives at the point where his artistic delusions come face to face with reality" (*HB* 271). She uses Asbury's character to critique the disembodied intellectuals produced by Modernism's Gnostic tendencies. He is the modern intellectual whose hubris and apathy toward the spiritual leave him unsuccessful in the material world. As a liberal and academic, Asbury feels greater than those around him, especially his own mother, who, in his understanding, represents ignorance in the narrow world of the Old South. Asbury finds the rural South, which he perceives as intellectually beneath him, unbearable.

In Asbury's story, aspects of O'Connor's Thomist thinking once again crop up. Since God willingly operates and interacts with the corporeal world, He is linked to everything, spiritual and physical. This philosophy, of course, is counter to the one observable in many of O'Connor's intellectuals, including Asbury. It also contradicts the ideas of many scholars she read or came in contact with while living in a society influenced by modernism. She was aware of the ever-present dualistic perception of the physical and spiritual in modern culture, especially in its literature (Desmond 151). She aimed to confront the modernist thought that relegated the supernatural to matters of faith. In contrast, she asserts in her work that spiritual forces are able to affect everyday life. O'Connor argues,

St. Augustine wrote that things of the world pour forth from God in a double way: intellectually into the minds of angels and physically into the world of things. To the person who believes this...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 (*MM* 157).

According to this statement, everything is a product of God, including man's reason. Therefore, in Asbury's story, the marriage of the physical and spiritual, represented in the natural world around him, mirrors especially the ability to join intellect and faith. In "The Enduring Chill" O'Connor uses natural surroundings, the black woods, to make a statement about the modern intellectual. When he tries to separate his intelligence from faith and trust wholly in it, he only grasps a false sense of life. This type of total separation is ultimately harmful because that intellectual loses touch with reality, thus leading to his (in this case Asbury's) lack of artistic creation.

In "The Enduring Chill," Asbury is a typical dualist. Before he dies, he seeks an "experience," a failed attempt to bond with the black men who work on his mother's farm. This search encompasses his struggle to fulfill a spiritual void. If a man has denied the traditional and spiritual, all he has left is the desire to experience. This is Asbury, who has been unable to feel and therefore needs something to fulfill the part of his humanity searching for something outside the factual and purely scientific. To him, "God is an idea created by man" (*Everything* 106). In Asbury's thinking, God does not truly exist and act through the physical world. His god is "Art, but he had been a faithful servant and Art was sending him death" (*Everything* 103). Although Asbury's god is Art, it is his lack of recognition of the Creator that leads him to his lack of creativity. Asbury, who partly blames his artistic failure on his mother, writes to her that he moved to New York "to escape the slave's atmosphere...to find freedom, to liberate my imagination" (*Everything* 91). He tells his mother "her way had simply been the air he breathed and when at last he had found other air [of superior thinking, of art], he couldn't survive in it" (*Everything* 92). The only thing he discovers as an artist, however, is that his imagination is stunted, and he cannot create. Asbury "is an incomplete man, because he fails to recognize man's spiritual nature: life and death to him are meaningless" (McCarthy 146-147).

O'Connor incorporates the dark line of woods throughout Asbury's story to set the stage for his confrontation with the existence of the supernatural, infusing it with a sense of the mysterious. On the morning of Asbury's return from New York to wait out what he thinks is a fatal disease, the sky "was a chill gray, and a startling white-gold sun, like some strange potentate from the east, was rising beyond the black woods....It cast a strange light over the single block of one-story brick and wooden shacks. Asbury felt he was about to witness a majestic transformation that the flat of roofs might at any moment turn into the mounting turrets

of some exotic temple for a god he didn't know" (*Everything* 82). Indeed, this is the God Asbury has rejected but who is now making for Himself a temple from the surrounding trees. This strange vision initiates the crumbling of Asbury's artistic and philosophical illusions. O'Connor comments on this transformation: "The problem was to have the Holy Ghost descend by degrees throughout the story but unrecognized, but at the end recognized, coming down, implacable, with ice instead of fire. I see no reason to limit the Holy Ghost to fire. He's full of surprises" (*HB* 293).

The tree line plays a role in the "coming down" of the Holy Ghost. At his mother's urging, Asbury sits daily on his front porch to, as she puts it, "enjoy the view." Here, he sits with "his hands gripped on the chair arms as if he were about to spring forward into the glaring china blue sky" (*Everything* 96). The scene "was rimmed by a wall of trees which, at the time of day he was forced to sit there, was a washed-out blue" (96). Later, as Asbury feels his death approaching he experiences the contrast of the light against these same trees: "The light in the room was beginning to have an odd quality, almost as if it were taking on presence...Outside it appeared to move no farther than the edge of the faded treeline, which he could see a few inches over the sill of his window" (109). This tree line turns dark as Asbury's agonizing confrontation with grace approaches. As he stares out the window, "A blinding red-gold sun moved serenely from under a purple cloud. Below it the tree line was black against the crimson sky. It formed a brittle wall, standing as if it were the frail defense he had set up in his mind to protect him from what was coming" (114). Grace breaks through as nature enters his room. What he tried to make his defense is God's way of getting through.

Asbury comes to a true knowledge of his ignorance only when he realizes the knowledge of grace. This realization is not essentially one of joy, but it is one that is necessary to shake

Asbury from his intellectual pride. Asbury's epiphany occurs when "he undeniably realizes that he's going to have to live with the new knowledge that he knows nothing. That really is what he is frozen in—humility" (*HB* 261). After learning he will not die, Asbury's awareness comes from his vision of the Holy Ghost descending, a fulfillment of Father Finn's earlier prediction that the Holy Ghost may be the last thing he gets. This final supernatural convergence comes through a water stain on Asbury's bedroom ceiling. As he lay there,

The old life in him was exhausted. He awaited the coming of the new... The fierce bird which through the years of his childhood and the days of his illness had been poised over his head, waiting mysteriously, appeared all at once to be in motion. Asbury blanched and the last film of illusion was torn as if by a whirlwind from his eyes. He saw that for the rest of his days, frail, racked, but enduring, he would live in the face of a purifying terror. A feeble cry, a last impossible protest escaped him. But the Holy Ghost, emblazoned in ice instead of fire, continued, implacable, to descend. (*Everything* 114)

When Asbury comes to the harsh realization—that his intellect is insufficient and there exists a higher intelligence—he becomes what McCarthy calls the "New Man... the intellectual man with a firm belief in man's spiritual nature" (1147). The water stain and the woods surrounding Asbury have been stagnant, mysterious defenses in his life against the truth he can now no longer deny. At this point, Asbury must recognize a being beyond himself. He is confronted with the supernatural through the corporeal, grace through nature.

In "Parker's Back" an epiphany occurs not from a line of trees but from a single flaming tree. Parker literally embodies O'Connor's sacramental theology at the end of this story, yet he begins the story denying any need for grace. Parker prides himself on his independence, his

womanizing, and his tattooed body. He cannot accept denial from any woman, which is the only reason he ends up with Sarah Ruth, a homely believer in the Straight Gospel who believes “pictures on the skin were vanity of vanities” (*Everything* 229). Parker has from a very young age been intrigued by body art. As a boy catching his first glimpse of a tattooed man, he “was filled with emotion, lifted up as some people are when the flag passes” (*Everything* 223). The tattooed man catches Parker’s eye and takes hold of his imagination. In his article discussing the iconic imagery in “Parker’s Back,” Dennis Patrick Slattery points to the imagination as the key to the story itself: “The larger concern of the story begins here—the imagination itself, specifically the theological imagination. The imagination begins in faith, but then seeks activity in the world an image to incarnate, to substantiate itself” (120). Slattery observes Parker’s need for visual stimulation to validate a faith and spiritual satisfaction he seeks. Parker is “not a man of abstraction but one who prefers the tangible and concrete” (Slattery 120). Seeing this tattooed man at the fair provides Parker with his first understanding of the importance of life and existence: “It was as if a blind boy had been turned so gently in a different direction that he did not know his destination had been changed” (*Everything* 223).

As Parker begins his own collection of tattoos, each successive one becoming more lifelike and colorful, he is only left with a feeling of dissatisfaction, which leads him to fill more empty space on his body. Although Parker is an anti-hero, he represents truth regarding the Thomist juxtaposition of matter and spirit. He senses that the physical, visible world connects to spiritual mysteries and is open to this possibility. Unlike Sarah Ruth, he is unafraid of the physical world, including the body, and does not accept the Gnostic view that the material world is evil and should be avoided and neglected. Rather, it is the connection of the physical world to his inward life which takes him longer to figure out.

Parker's encounter with God is reminiscent of Moses standing shoeless on Mt. Sinai before the burning bush. Instead of a bush, however, it is a tree that speaks to Parker. His experience with grace through nature is the turning point of the story in which he can no longer arrogantly laugh in the face of God, but must take some action to appease his thirst to be spiritually fulfilled. While baling hay, Parker's

tractor crashed upside-down into the tree and burst into flame. The first thing Parker saw were his shoes, quickly being eaten by the fire; one was caught under the tractor, the other was some distance away, burning by itself. He was not in them. He could feel the hot breath of the burning tree on his face. He scrambled backwards...and if he had known how to cross himself he would have done it. (*Everything* 233)

After this encounter, Parker "knew that there had been a great change in his life, a leap forward into a worse unknown...it was for all intents accomplished" (*Everything* 233). Parker does not hear verbal instructions about what action to take, yet the experience is not lost on him. He knows something or someone has demanded something of him. His "experience is one in which grace intrudes into the temporal world through the things of the world—the burning tree, his burning shoes; it is the moment in which a man's life is taken from him to serve God" (Slattery 122).

Parker must now carry out a sacred act, which to him means getting a "religious" tattoo. He is haunted by the vision of the tree bursting into flame, reaching out to grasp him. He is being pursued and cannot escape. It is this experience which leads to his taking of the sacrament, bearing the image of Christ on his back. After this, any proud words seem "to leave his mouth like wraiths and to evaporate at once as if he had never uttered them" (*Everything* 238). Christ's

“eyes that were now forever on his back were eyes to be obeyed. He was as certain of it as he had ever been of anything” (*Everything* 241). O’Connor once again uses a physical, visible object from the natural world, “a tree of light burst[ing] over the skyline” to showcase her Thomist belief that grace comes to man through the world around him (*Everything* 242). Those who are open and obey receive it.

For Parker, a new faith means a new name. He finally accepts his biblical name, Obadiah, which he previously rejected. At once, he feels “light pouring through him, turning his spider web soul into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts” (*Everything* 243). This completes the unification of his body and soul, Christ filling him outwardly and inwardly.

Parker’s newfound sacramental faith is contrasted by his wife’s fundamentalist concern with shunning any vestige of God found in the physical world. Her denial of the unification of spirit and matter to represent Christ in the world falsifies and cheapens her faith. Her preoccupation with idolatry causes her to miss the presence of Christ as He appears in the physical world. When Parker reveals the likeness of Christ on his back, Sarah Ruth becomes violent: “ ‘Idolatry! Enflaming yourself with idols under every green tree! I can put up with lies and vanity but I don’t want no idolater in this house!’ and she grabbed up the broom and began to thrash him across the shoulders with it” (*Everything* 244). By thrashing Parker’s back, Sarah Ruth reenacts the crucifixion of Christ. In her violent opposition toward the image of Christ, she rejects the Incarnation, God making Himself in the image of man. Sarah Ruth is the embodiment of the fundamentalist Protestant Gnosticism O’Connor found to be dangerous. To make God an abstraction is to cut Him off from the world and any connection to its people. O’Connor’s God is physical in the incarnation of Christ and real in the sacraments. Just as Christ is physically

present in the taking of communion, O'Connor everywhere displays His physical presence in her stories.

Throughout *Everything that Rises Must Converge*, Flannery O'Connor incorporates the distinct image of trees as a sacramental display of grace. Something as mundane as a tree line is used to convey the highest truth. O'Connor was not an artist of the abstract but one thoroughly engaged in the concrete details of her world—its people, its experiences, and its nature. She approached it like “Dr. Johnson’s blind housekeeper poured tea: she kept her finger inside the cup. Not until the hot liquid scalds her thumb is O'Connor assured that she is dealing with real rather than theoretical matters” (Wood 2). This emphasis on experiencing the abstract through the concrete, the symbol through the image, is the basis for her art, a basis finding its source ultimately in the picture of God found in Christ, truly the supreme example of the supernatural finding its way into the physical realm. Because of the Incarnation, O'Connor was able to find a source for the grace she wished to display artistically and experientially—the corporeal world. Her incarnational vision was vital to what she herself described as a good novelist, one who knows that “he cannot approach the infinite directly, that he must penetrate the natural human world as it is. The more sacramental his theology, the more encouragement he will get from it to do just that” (MM 163). As a Thomist, O'Connor was fully devoted to God’s suffusion of grace through the everyday experience of humanity in the world in which it lives. She knew, as humans, that “Our response to life is different if we have been taught only a definition of faith than it is if we have trembled with Abraham as he held the knife over Isaac” (MM 202-03). Man must feel, hear, taste, and see God around him. Every image has the potential to act as a witness of His active grace.

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Slattery, Dennis Patrick. "Faith in Search of an Image: The Iconic Dimension of Flannery O'Connor's 'Parker's Back.'" *The South Central Bulletin*. (Winter 1981): 120-123.

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Tuck McFarland, Dorothy. "Everything that Rises Must Converge." *Flannery O'Connor*. (1976): 43-71.

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Literary Thesis

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Annotated Bibliography

Aquinas, Thomas. Fairweather, A.M., ed. *Aquinas on Nature and Grace*. Philadelphia:

Westminster Press, 1954. This work is comprised of selections from *Summa Theologica* dealing specifically with the subjects of nature and grace. Much of the focus is on the nature of God and a philosophical understanding of God and His relationship to humans. Aquinas maps out the working of grace and its necessity in the human life. This source provides support for my connection between O'Connor's use of grace in her work and the theological foundation she found in Aquinas.

---. Brian Davies and Brian Leftow, eds. *Summa Theologiae, Questions on God*. Cambridge:

Cambridge UP, 2006. Similar to *Aquinas on Nature and Grace*, this work is a compilation of questions about God which Aquinas discusses. Aquinas argues God's relationship to the physical world as the Creator of all things. Therefore, God is able to move freely through the natural world to reveal Himself to humanity. Again, I use this source to help me understand O'Connor's thinking about God and how He relates to the material world.

Desmond, John F. "Flannery O'Connor and the Symbol." *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought*

and Culture 5 (2002): 143-156. Desmond points out the importance of symbolism in O'Connor's work. He studies her "incarnational art" as breaking through to the mysteriesconnection O'Connor makes between these worlds as it is based in the

Incarnation itself. The material element of the symbol leads the reader to a spiritual mystery, the true essence of that element. Desmond's article makes a similar philosophical statement as my study. O'Connor's work is filled with the joining of nature and spirit, artistically and dramatically revealing God's presence in experience and matter.

Gilson, Etienne. *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*. Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame Press, 1956. In this work, Gilson introduces the basic thinking of Aquinas on the connection between faith and reason and the existence of God as He is revealed through the world. My main focus in this work is the argument that God as Creator is able to show Himself through His creation. I connect this to O'Connor's use of imagery as a direct conduit of God's active grace in the world.

Gooch, Brad. *Flannery: A Life of Flannery O'Connor*. New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2009. In this biography of Gooch, my main interest is in his study of religion in the life of Flannery O'Connor. From her early years to her death, O'Connor held true to her Catholic roots and was a faithful follower of the Church. I am interested especially in the role of the Church and Catholic schools in O'Connor's childhood as it provided a foundation for her interest in the Gospel.

McCarthy, John F. "Human Intelligence versus Divine Truth: The Intellectual in Flannery O'Connor's Works." *The English Journal* 55 (1966): 1143-1148. This article discusses a major conflict found in many of O'Connor's protagonists: man's intellect versus God's knowledge. McCarthy focuses on many of the intellectuals in O'Connor's work to illustrate this tension. According to his interpretation, these intellectuals cannot find fulfillment in their own intelligence. I use this source as support for my discussion of

Asbury in "The Enduring Chill" as the typical modern intellectual. I use McCarthy's study to show how Asbury's disconnect between the physical world and spiritual world leaves him confused and impotent. McCarthy helps my study by showing how Asbury's absorption with his own intellect leaves him too proud to accept God until He forcefully reveals Himself.

O'Connor, Flannery. *Everything that Rises Must Converge*. New York: Farrar, 1965. This collection from O'Connor is my primary source, and much of my study consists of a discussion of its stories. While reading these stories, I noticed several occurrences of a tree line leading me to question its repeated presence. My research led me to connect this collection especially to O'Connor's theological belief in the connection between God and the world, between nature and grace.

---, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*. Eds. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald. New York:

Farrar, 1961. Friends of Flannery O'Connor, Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, compiled this set of unpublished essays, lectures, and critical essays found after her death in 1964.

O'Connor's wit and faith are clearly seen in this collection which includes essays on regional writing, teaching literature, and religion. These articles are valuable as isolated pieces of writing and also as complements to O'Connor's short stories and novels. I use these selected works as support from O'Connor herself on my interpretations of her characters and dramatic imagery. Her commentary is always useful in understanding her theological and artistic principles as they relate to her work. Much of the commentary on *Everything that Rises Must Converge* comes from this source.

---, *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor*. Ed. Sally Fitzgerald. New York: Farrar, 1979. Flannery O'Connor was known for her consistent correspondence. She replied to

most of those who wrote to her at her mother's farm in Georgia. This collection of her letters includes ones written to close literary friends, old college friends, agents, publishers, and even to some people she had never met personally. Her letters reveal the wit and intelligence embodied in her work. This collection of letters provides me with a vast supply of O'Connor's personal thoughts on her art and on her theological principles, both of which are important to my survey of *Everything that Rises Must Converge*.

Raiger, Michael. *Seeing into the Life of Things: Essays on Literature and Religious Experience*, edited by John L. Mahoney, pp. 242-70. New York: Fordham UP, 1998. Raiger supports my analysis of "Revelation." He sees the allegorical nature of O'Connor's writing and also looks at the landscape as a conduit of God's grace.

Roos, John. "The Political in Flannery O'Connor: A Reading of 'A View of the Woods.'" *Studies in Short Fiction*. 29.2 (Spring 1992): 161-180. APSU. 21 November 2008

Studies in Short Fiction. 29.2 (Spring 1992): 161-180. APSU. 21 November 2008

<<http://web.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.lib.apsu.edu>>. Roos looks at "A View of the Woods"

from a political perspective, specifically dealing with the philosophy of John Locke and his ideas on Natural Law and Reason being the source for man's autonomy. This is the philosophy Mr. Fortune who frees himself to do whatever he likes with his farm.

However, Roos looks alternatively at a Thomist reading "A View of the Woods." From this perspective, the natural world belongs to God, and man must realize it belongs to Him as the arena on which He displays His grace. My interest is in Roos' second interpretation, which agrees with my use of the tree line in this story to illustrate the joining of nature and grace.

Russell, Shannon. "Space and the Movement Through Space in *Everything that Rises Must Converge*: A Consideration of Flannery O'Connor's Imaginative Vision." *Southern*

Literary Journal. 20.2 (Spring 1988): 81-98. Rpt. in *Short Story Criticism*. Ed. Thomas J. Schoenberg and Lawrence J. Trudeau. Vol. 82. Detroit: Gale, 2005. 81-98. *Literature Resources from Gale*. APSU. 26 June 2009

<<http://go.galegroup.com.exproxy.lib.apsu.edu>>. Russell studies how O'Connor's use of physical space and how her characters move through this space is used to reveal spiritual mystery. She focuses on O'Connor's use of "solid presence in the physical universe" to reveal the divine. Russell actually looks at *Everything that Rises Must Converge* for examples of this, thus her study relates closely to mine and helps support my thesis.

Slattery, Dennis Patrick. "Faith in Search of an Image: The Iconic Dimension of Flannery

O'Connor's 'Parker's Back.'" *The South Central Bulletin*. (Winter 1981): 120-123.

Patrick's reading of "Parker's Back" looks at how Parker "learns to focus his moral vision on the visible creation in order to apprehend...the invisible presence of the Creator by means of grace" (120). He discusses the use of the icon in the Catholic Church as the means of conveying Christ and relates this iconic imagery directly to Parker's tattoos. Slattery's analysis agrees with my study because it begins with the connection of the physical and spiritual. However, I focus more intently on the tree's role as a testament of God's revelation of grace. Slattery's theological interpretation of O'Connor's imagery agrees with mine.

Srigley, Susan. *Flannery O'Connor's Sacramental Art*. Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame Press.

2004. Srigley's purpose in this book is "to demonstrate how O'Connor's ethics are inextricably linked to her role as a storyteller and how her moral vision is played out in the drama of her fiction" (2). In part, Srigley achieves this by seeing the effects of Thomism on O'Connor's work. Specifically relating to my research is her discussion of

the joining of nature and grace in O'Connor's fiction as it directly relates to her Catholic thinking. Although not dealing with the specific stories I consider in my thesis, Srigley's source is useful as it links O'Connor's artistic elements to her sacramental theology.

Tuck McFarland, Dorothy. "Everything that Rises Must Converge." *Flannery O'Connor*. (1976): 43-71. I use this source to support my analysis of "Greenleaf." I agree with Tuck McFarland's ideas about convergence and symbolism in O'Connor's fiction—that they are forms used to convey the invasion of God into Mrs. May's life.

Wood, Ralph. *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004. This source is dedicated to a cultural and theological analysis of Flannery O'Connor's work. Ralph C. Wood traces the roots of O'Connor's writing to her Roman Catholicism and the Christ-haunted character of the American South. He claims O'Connor's work will endure and have universal significance because of these roots. Her art will last because it offers insightful spiritual answers to difficult cultural questions, especially to the believer and the Southerner. In providing this spiritual element to a discussion of O'Connor's work, Wood's book is very helpful to the background for my interpretation of *Everything that Rises Must Converge*. He offers valuable information about the spiritual and cultural milieu in which O'Connor lived and wrote. Part of my study will be to look at how O'Connor reacts to this environment as she dramatically displays her Christian vision.