

FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S DRAGON

ESSAYS

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FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S DRAGON

An Abstract

Presented to

the Graduate Council of
Austin Peay State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Mary Helen Adams

August 1974

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Mary Helen Adams entitled "Flannery O'Connor's Dragon." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

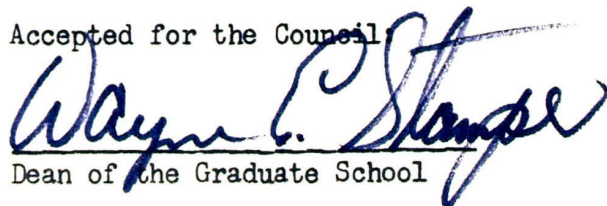

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ABSTRACT

Flannery O'Connor argued that the disease from which she suffered for fourteen years did not affect her writing. However, the illness suggests a rather obvious connection with her concern for death and violence, accompanied by a constant search for redemption. O'Connor attributes this to her religious background, but her works must certainly have been influenced by the ever-present shadow of death. Her morbid and grotesque depictions of life are, at least in part, assignable to the suffering she endured with the disease which finally took her life.

This study is not meant to be an adverse criticism of Flannery O'Connor's writing ability, for her stories and novels are exemplary in southern literary history. The intent is to suggest that O'Connor's own statement that her disease was "of no consequence" to her writing is misleading.

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The dragon sits by the side of the road,
watching those who pass. Beware lest he
devour you. We go to the Father of
Souls, but it is necessary to pass by the
dragon.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem

No matter what form the dragon may take,
it is of this mysterious passage past him,
or into his jaws, that stories of any
depth will always be concerned to tell. . . .

Flannery O'Connor

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Early in her writing career, Flannery O'Connor became ill with what was later diagnosed as systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE). She suffered from that disorder for the remaining years of her life. This study of her life and fiction is based primarily on the progression of that disease and its effect on her work. It is evident that the violent, the grotesque, the bizarre, and a preoccupation with death intensified in her work after the advent of serious illness in 1950.

When asked if her illness affected her writing, Flannery O'Connor voiced her denial: "The disease is of no consequence to my writing, since for that I use my head and not my feet."¹ She attributed the prevalence of grotesqueries in her stories to religious influence and her southern background.

There is, however, medical evidence that a chronic illness of the type Flannery O'Connor had is frequently complicated by organic neurologic and psychotic disturbances.² Several critics believe that the disease which wracked her body also produced the spirit of extreme reality which dominates her work.

¹Margaret Inman Meaders, "Flannery O'Connor: 'Literary Witch,'" Colorado Quaterly (Spring, 1962), 385.

²Cecil-Loeb Textbook of Medicine, ed. Paul B. Beeson, M.D., and Walsh McDermott, M.D. (Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders Co., 1971), p. 819.

The second chapter of this thesis is devoted to a summary of Flannery O'Connor's background and life, with brief comments on some of the forces which motivated her writing.

The progression of the theme of death in her work is the concern of Chapter Three. This theme is traced from Flannery O'Connor's first nine short stories through the remainder of the twenty-two stories and two novels up to the time of her death in 1964. Also included in this chapter are O'Connor's personal comments on death, as well as her reasons for her preoccupation with the subject.

The fourth chapter brings out some of the circumstances aside from, but doubtlessly connected with, the physical aspects of lupus which were influences on the themes prevalent in the works of Flannery O'Connor. Her personal reactions to her role in life are also dealt with here.

Chapter Five shows how O'Connor revised her first short story, "The Geranium," into "Judgement Day," a story she intended as the final one in her last collection of short stories. The change in tone of her writing is apparent; for violence, death, and cynicism are markedly pronounced in the latter story, while practically nonexistent in the first. On the other hand, it is equally apparent in a comparison of the two stories that the shift in tone due to the author's changed perspective in no way affected her skill with the written word.

CHAPTER II

BACKGROUND OF THE AUTHOR

Robert and Sally Fitzgerald first met Flannery O'Connor at a party in New York City. O'Connor, just twenty-four years old at the time, was an aspiring writer living in New York's upper West Side. Her circle of friends was small, but the Fitzgeralds quickly became an integral part of that circle and remained close to her until her death in 1964. This relationship has proved invaluable in the study of O'Connor's life and fiction.

During the summer of the year they met Flannery O'Connor, the Fitzgeralds bought a house in Connecticut and invited her to live with them there. At this time she had published a few short stories and was working on her first novel. The isolation of the Connecticut countryside proved favorable to O'Connor's work; but while typing the first draft of her novel in December, 1950, she began to be bothered by what she called a "heaviness" in her arms.¹ This was an early sign of the disease which was to plague her for the next fourteen years and to darken the atmosphere of her stories and novels from that time on.

Flannery O'Connor was born on March 25, 1925, in Savannah, Georgia, the only child of Regina Cline and Edward Francis O'Connor. They lived in Savannah until 1938, when the illness of Edward O'Connor

¹Robert Fitzgerald, Introduction to Everything That Rises Must Converge, by Flannery O'Connor (New York: New American Library, 1967), p. xiv.

prompted their move to Milledgeville, Georgia, the home of Regina O'Connor's family. Three years later Mr. O'Connor died of disseminated lupus, a blood-vessel disease with hereditary traits which were passed on to the daughter. The death of her father while she was still a teenager influenced Flannery O'Connor's subsequent literary works, in which the father-image is missing for all adolescents while the mother-image is dominant.

O'Connor lived with her family in the old Cline mansion in Milledgeville, the source of another of her background influences. This imposing house, built by slaves and acquired by the Cline family in the late 1800's, manifests itself in varying forms in the O'Connor stories, along with the accompanying heritage of a well-established Southern family. Both the Clines and the O'Connors were Roman Catholics in a predominantly Protestant region, and Flannery O'Connor's religious background was strong. She later delineated, in several essays and speeches, how considerable an influence her religion had on her writing. Of her work in general she said, "Much of my fiction takes its character from a reasonable use of the unreasonable. The assumptions that underlie this use of it, however, are those of the central Christian mysteries."²

O'Connor attended the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop after finishing Georgia Women's College in Milledgeville. From her residence in Iowa City, she submitted her first publications, "The Geranium" and "The Crop," to Accent on February 7, 1946. "The Geranium" was also the opening story in the typescript of her Master's thesis.

²Flannery O'Connor, Mystery and Manners, eds. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1970), p. 109.

When her fellowship at the University of Iowa expired, O'Connor was invited to join the artists' colony, Yaddo, at Saratoga Springs, New York, where she worked for a year before moving to New York City. Two more of her stories were published in 1948: "The Train," which was published in April in the Sewanee Review, and "The Capture" (retitled "The Turkey" in The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor), which appeared in Mademoiselle in November.

Flannery O'Connor never intended returning to Georgia to live but planned to make it on her own, according to Robert Fitzgerald. She was destined, however, to have only two more years away from the South which was so vitally important in her stories. Fitzgerald's descriptions of her furnished room in New York as "drab," and the garage study-bedroom in Connecticut as "austere," with a "Sears-Roebuck dresser" the only piece of furniture, are indicative of how much Flannery O'Connor wanted to stay away from Georgia, where she could have had a choice of two comfortable dwellings, the Cline home or the family farm, "Andalusia."

She chose to remain with the Fitzgeralds in Connecticut, devoting most of her day to the manuscript which would be Wise Blood. She and the Fitzgeralds developed an extraordinary friendship which made them her chief correspondents while she was ill.

When O'Connor first became ill, she visited a Connecticut doctor who diagnosed her malady as rheumatoid arthritis and suggested she have a more thorough check-up while in Georgia for the Christmas season. She became extremely ill on the train en route home and was hospitalized on arrival. The Connecticut doctor's diagnosis was incorrect but not surprising, as the symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis are similar to the early signs of lupus.

In O'Connor's case, lupus was treated with large doses of a cortisone derivative, ACTH. With this drug, her doctor was able to hinder, at least temporarily, the progress of the disease. She was unable to climb stairs when she finally left the hospital, and she and her mother moved from the Cline house in town to "Andalusia," the farm which Regina O'Connor had inherited from a brother.

The move to the farm, situated five miles from town, was a contributing factor to the isolated life O'Connor began to live. She also had been warned that letting herself get overly tired might reactivate the disease. The seclusion was not unwelcome to the shy young writer who was happiest with few people around. As Josephine Hendin expresses it, "Her illness seems only to have reinforced and cemented an isolation that had always existed, a feeling of being 'other'...³ Most of her daily life revolved around her work and the company of her mother and a Negro family who operated the farm.

O'Connor worked at her writing from nine to twelve every morning and spent the rest of the day "recuperating from it,"⁴ as she put it. At this particular time, while trying to overcome her first bout with lupus, she attempted some revisions of Wise Blood, which had been accepted for publication by Harcourt, Brace. Unfortunately, a recurrence of high fever sent her back to the hospital; but finally she mailed the retyped manuscript to the Fitzgeralds, who then forwarded it to Caroline Gordon,

³ Josephine Hendin, The World of Flannery O'Connor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), p. 9.

⁴ Dorothy Walters, Flannery O'Connor (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., Wichita State University, 1973), p. 16.

a friend and critic of O'Connor's. Miss Gordon helped in the final revision of the novel. The book was published in May, 1952, and Flannery O'Connor emerged as a novelist.

About this same time a remission of lupus allowed O'Connor to do some traveling. She was able to go as far as Connecticut to visit the Fitzgeralds; but the trip proved too much, and a virus infection aroused her disease, necessitating an increase in the dosage of ACTH. At one time during the treatment she wrote to Fitzgerald: "The large doses of ACTH send you off in a rocket and are scarcely less disagreeable than the disease. . . ."⁵

For the next twelve years, Flannery O'Connor experienced periods of remission followed by severe bouts with lupus. In 1954 it was necessary for her to begin walking with a cane, and a year later crutches, as the disease or the treatment, or both, had weakened her leg bones at the hip; but her doctor found a replacement drug that offered O'Connor some relief, and one which could be taken by tablet. With this drug she experienced her greatest period of remission and did some traveling and lecturing from 1957 until 1964. The trips were brief, however, and only in the line of her work.

Flannery O'Connor's mother protected her daughter with a great intensity, becoming her constant companion and a dominant force in her life. She praised her, as Josephine Hendin says, "for not seeking out friends but waiting until they came to her."⁶ Hendin speaks, too, of

⁵Fitzgerald, p. xv.

⁶Hendin, p. 8.

Mrs. O'Connor's pride in the girl who "did her work" while others "fooled around" and of the mother's accounts of how happy her daughter was.⁷ Regina O'Connor had lost her husband to this crippling disease and knew it was likely to take the life of her only child, too.

In 1964 what her mother had feared and sought to protect her from happened: Flannery O'Connor had to have minor abdominal surgery which reactivated the lupus uncontrollably.

Caroline Gordon visited O'Connor in the Piedmont Hospital in Atlanta in May and found her still writing, although she kept her notebook under her pillow out of sight of nurses and doctors who didn't think she should do any work. O'Connor stayed in the hospital through June and was able to return home only once more. She realized now that the end was near as she wrote to Robert Fitzgerald, "Ask Sally to pray that the lupus don't finish me off too quick."⁸ She died in a coma in the Milledgeville Hospital on August 3, 1964.

⁷Hendin, p. 9.

⁸Fitzgerald, p. xx.

CHAPTER III

PROGRESSION OF THE DEATH THEME

Before Flannery O'Connor became ill in 1950 her writing consisted of nine short stories and the first draft of the novel Wise Blood, which included revisions of three short stories. Six of the nine were submitted as thesis requirements for an M.F.A., while three were not published until O'Connor's death.

Interestingly enough, O'Connor uses death as a theme in only one of these nine stories; missing is the bizarre, unsettling finality of the later stories written under the cloud of her own illness. The death theme prevails in "The Wildcat," where Gabriel, a blind old Negro, remembers an incident from his childhood when Old Hezuh was killed by a wildcat. As the story ends, Gabriel awaits the cat, assuming it must kill him, too. Since death is the natural issue of old age, the reader can readily accept the demise of Gabriel.

This end which Gabriel imagines for himself at the mercy of a wildcat is typical of the strange mind-wanderings of the senile. Old Dudley is the aging protagonist of O'Connor's first story, "The Geranium," in which Dudley's whole life revolves around a pitiful plant in an apartment window across from his own. He is a displaced person from the South living "up North," and the geranium gives him a single tie to his former life. This early story climaxes as the geranium falls to the ground six floors below, while Old Dudley sits weeping, fighting to overcome his fear of going down to pick it up. The climax of the

revision, retitled "Judgement Day," written shortly before O'Connor's death, is much more involved with a total theme change and a grotesque death for the old man.

Four of the early stories, with varied themes, became chapters in subsequent O'Connor novels. "The Barber," a political discussion in a barber shop, became a chapter in The Violent Bear It Away; while "The Train," "The Peeler," and "The Heart of the Park" introduced Hazel Motes and Enoch Emery, the principal characters in Wise Blood. These four stories, however, give no hint of the development they later received as chapters in the two novels. The early protagonists are not the strange and often violent "Jesus-freaks" who people the completed novels. As Martha Stephens says, the human scene which Flannery O'Connor creates in the early stories is much more regular and familiar than the crazily distorted world of the later works.¹

"The Turkey," the fifth story in the typescript of her M.F.A. thesis, represents an early indication of O'Connor's talent for the unexpected. Published under the title "The Capture" in Mademoiselle, in 1961, the story builds to a finish which leaves the reader with a queer feeling of uncertainty. Ruller McFarney, although just eleven years old, represents one of the first of O'Connor's "sinners" on whom judgment descends. He possesses a desperate need to prove to his family (and to himself) that he is "an unusual child." The catching of a wild turkey, one already half-dead, will be his proof. Up to this particular time, Ruller had tried uttering, in secret, all sorts of profanities as a means

¹Martha Stephens, The Question of Flannery O'Connor (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), p. 87.

of making himself feel important. Fully aware that cursing is a sin, he feels he must be "going to the devil." The lame turkey symbolizes for Ruller a sign from God "to keep him from going bad." This revelation is vitiated, however, when some "country boys" steal the turkey from him just before he reaches home. Ruller, with his guilt deep inside him, runs to his house feeling that God is no longer on his side and "certain that Something Awful was tearing behind him with its arms rigid and its fingers ready to clutch."² In the light of O'Connor's later stories and her obsessive concern with revelatory moments and punishment for past sins, "The Turkey" stands as one of the clearest expressions of her Christian philosophy. Without being conscious of it, she had also clearly expressed the impression readers would have about her writing, especially the later stories: O'Connor wrote as if "Something Awful" was tearing behind her with its fingers ready to clutch.

Women, always among O'Connor's chief satirical targets, are the protagonists in the final two stories written before 1950, "A Stroke of Good Fortune" and "The Crop." In "A Stroke of Good Fortune" (first published under the title "A Woman on the Stairs"), the chief character, Ruby Hill, has been, for several years, extremely proud of her husband's care in preventing her becoming pregnant; and she refuses to face the fact that fate has finally overtaken her. The denial of her "womanhood" makes her the butt of O'Connor's ridicule, for Ruby is found at the age of thirty-four bearing her first child and refusing to believe it. The

² Flannery O'Connor, The Complete Stories (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1972), p. 53.

situation becomes more acutely ironic when Ruby recalls the prophecy of palmist Madame Zoleeda, who had told Ruby she would have a long illness followed by "a stroke of good fortune." The condition can hardly be considered "good fortune" for a woman like Ruby Hill, who associates childbirth and children with old age and death and ignorance. O'Connor's satire finds expression here in one of its finest forms.

"The Crop," unpublished until after O'Connor's death, shows the direction she might have taken had not illness and her own proximity to death invaded her writing. It portrays, according to Robert Fitzgerald, "a small caricature of that shady type, the imaginative artist. . . ."³ Stanley Hyman says O'Connor created characters and their dramatic oppositions by separating, exaggerating, and polarizing elements in herself.⁴ If she later found within herself elements of the one-legged Ph.D., Joy Hulga of "Good Country People," she surely saw herself early on as a Miss Willerton. The rambling thoughts of Miss Willerton, the "artist" at her typewriter as she attempts a beginning to a story, are unique and autobiographical: "'Now What had she been thinking about? Oh. Bakers. Hmmm. Bakers. No, bakers wouldn't do. Hardly colorful enough. No social tension connected with bakers. . . . Hmmm. Teachers?' Miss Willerton wondered. 'No. Heavens no.' Teachers always made Miss Willerton feel peculiar. . . . 'Social problem. Social problem. Hmmm. Share-croppers!' . . . It was coming to her now! 'Certainly!' Her fingers

³O'Connor, The Complete Stories, p. 551.

⁴Stanley Edgar Hyman, Flannery O'Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1966), p. 45.

plinked excitedly over the keys, never touching them. Then suddenly she began typing at great speed."⁵

Miss Willerton lives each story that she writes, actually becoming her own protagonist. "The Crop" satirizes the old maid writer and lacks the sinister elements so prominent in later stories. It represents an early example of O'Connor's ability to write good stories without depending on death to end them.

In Pope's Essay on Criticism, he insists that a critic should not judge a work simply by its parts but should judge the whole, or the entirety. With Flannery O'Connor, it is not difficult to apply this advice to the entirety of her works, as the bulk of her writing is so small, and it is easier to form a total impression of her fiction. The themes of human mortality are more evident when the stories are read continuously, and her fascination with death is seen to be markedly dominant after her illness. She knew not only the crippling effects of lupus but also the likelihood of its proving fatal.

A comparison of her first stories with those published after 1950 shows the thematic change that took place. In the early writings, Flannery O'Connor was developing a talent for regional fiction with varied themes. These stories are lacking in the macabre and in the tendency toward concluding them with death. O'Connor's illness and impending death narrowed her vision, however, and the later stories, while displaying more depth and complexity of style, have an unmistakable framework of Christian redemptive qualities. O'Connor's writing from

⁵O'Connor, "The Crop," Complete Stories, pp. 34-35.

the onset of her illness appears to be personally cathartic, a purging of her own soul. Her characters become scapegoats upon whom she unloads her emotional struggles. They are continually beset with problems, are caught up in their evil deeds and their forays with the devil, and are lacking in any deep sustaining form of love or understanding. Indeed, one begins to feel that death is a welcome outlet, and perhaps the only one. O'Connor told an interviewer in 1963, "I can't imagine a story that doesn't properly end in death or in its foreshadowings."⁶ The proof of this statement lies in the twenty-two stories written after 1949; exactly half of them end in death, while most of the others leave the reader with a sense of uneasiness that produces the same feelings experienced at the end of those which conclude in death. A brief look at some of these violent conclusions will support this point, for O'Connor's final scenes often leave the reader reeling with shock.

One representative example of a gruesome ending is the bizarre death of the cynical grandmother in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" (1953). This tale of horror moves slowly and methodically to a brutal mass murder in the peaceful Georgia countryside. The grandmother typifies O'Connor's female characters in her egotism, selfishly failing to identify herself with ordinary people. She has never admitted that life exists outside her own experience. Like Mrs. Turpin, in "Revelation," Mrs. May, in "Greenleaf," and Julian's mother, in "Everything That Rises Must Converge," she holds herself above the "common" people. The title,

⁶C. Ross Mullins, "Flannery O'Connor, An Interview," Jubilee, II (June, 1963), 35.

"A Good Man Is Hard to Find," expresses the philosophy of the O'Connor protagonists. The grandmother maintains a condescending attitude toward the Misfit throughout the story, perhaps not realizing her life rests in his hands. She questions him interminably about whether he ever prays, and in her final minutes of life is trying to coax him into the belief that he is a good man: "You've got good blood! I know you wouldn't shoot a lady! I know you come from nice people! Pray! Jesus, you ought not to shoot a lady!"⁷ Her daughter-in-law has already been shot, along with the grandmother's son and her three grandchildren; but she refuses to face the fact that this man could kill her--a lady. Her epiphany is the core of the story, however, and when O'Connor's protagonists come to a disclosure of grace, their deaths usually follow. The grandmother is no exception.

Monstrous as it may be, the death of someone like the grandmother is more acceptable to the reader than that of a child, the distressing situation found in "The River" (1953), another example of one of O'Connor's uncanny conclusions. Young Harry Ashfield, or Bevel, as he renames himself after the preacher who baptizes him, is a shabby, unloved child who spends his time with a baby sitter while his father and mother spend theirs partying or recovering from hangovers. The sad story becomes an ironic one when this innocent child walks into the river to find "the Kingdom of Christ." Since he is too young to know what he is doing or to understand what is revealed to him at the moment of death, Bevel can't experience true illumination. His suffering, like that of poor witless Norton in "The Lame Shall Enter First" (1962), is caused by neglectful

⁷O'Connor, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," Complete Stories, pp. 131-32.

parents. They are the ones who need the revelation of grace; the punishment should be theirs. This represents one of O'Connor's methods of making the reader look at himself with new eyes. She calls it a violent means of getting the vision across to a hostile audience.⁸

While Flannery O'Connor's stories have two kinds of protagonists, those who are totally innocent or ignorant about grace and the ones who consciously refuse to believe in grace, death comes to them, regardless of their state, in equally strange manners. For instance, in "A Late Encounter With the Enemy" (1953), one-hundred-four-year-old General Tennessee Flintrock Sash, wearing the gray uniform of the Confederacy, is wheeled on stage at the graduation exercises of his sixty-four-year-old granddaughter for her personal triumph. Death approaches General Sash, who was a general only for a Hollywood premiere, as he sits on the stage. It comes in the form of a procession marching through an "ever-widening hole in his head," and he dies before hundreds of people who neither care nor notice. The general's passing is different from that of others in O'Connor's fiction in that he dies of natural causes, but the circumstances certainly place it among the macabre.

Yet another grim example is found in "The Displaced Person" (1954), in which Guizac, a Polish immigrant, is killed when a tractor runs over him while three people, who might have prevented the accident, refuse to help. One of the spectators, Mrs. McIntyre, as a result of her failure to help Guizac, immediately comes down with a nervous affliction which leaves her in "declining health," with no eyesight and an inability to speak for the remainder of her lonely life.

⁸O'Connor, Mystery and Manners, p. 34.

The bloodiest of the deaths is that of Mrs. May, in "Greenleaf" (1956). Like the grandmother, Mrs. May refuses to face reality and feels certain she has control over her own destiny. "I'll die when I get good and ready," she says. It fails to happen according to her plan, as Mrs. May is impaled on the horns of a scrub bull which she denied the use of her pasture.

Thus the variations on the death theme continue as long as O'Connor's stories do. Julian's mother dies of a stroke on a public sidewalk following an extreme humiliation;⁹ Mr. Fortune bangs his granddaughter's head against a rock after taking a severe beating from her;¹⁰ Thomas shoots his mother instead of the common nymphomaniac she has taken into the house;¹¹ and little Norton Sheppard hangs himself in order to search for his mother, whom he believes to be "in the sky somewhere."¹²

Apart from the stories which are dependent on death are those which end in utter hopelessness. "Good Country People" (1955) is an example of the shattering of hope, as well as being outstanding satire. Hulga Hopewell, Ph.D., appears so thoroughly obnoxious that she fails to evoke pity from the reader simply because she has only one leg. Hulga's

⁹O'Connor, "Everything That Rises Must Converge," Complete Stories.

¹⁰O'Connor, "A View of the Woods," Complete Stories.

¹¹O'Connor, "The Comforts of Home," Complete Stories.

¹²O'Connor, "The Lame Shall Enter First," Complete Stories.

plot to seduce a traveling Bible salesman, beginning virtually as an outrage against both the salesman and her mother, turns into the supreme personal insult when the salesman cajoles Hulga into removing her artificial leg and then runs off with it. This ironic situation doesn't fail to preach the redemptive qualities; for Hulga, like the other O'Connor characters, has her moment of revelation; and, while the judgment meted out to her is not death, it is painful nevertheless.

Not as painful, but more terrifying in its finality, is the fate of Asbury in "The Enduring Chill" (1958). Asbury manifests the sin of pride, as do so many of O'Connor's characters; and, like the others, he feels that he controls his destiny. He returns to his home, a sick man, assured that his days are numbered and prepared to die in his own pre-conceived fashion. He proceeds immediately to make life unbearable for all around him with his strange ideas and absurd requests. The irony surfaces when the local small-town doctor diagnoses Asbury's "fatal" disease and he is told by his mother, "' . . . you have undulant fever. It'll keep coming back but it won't kill you!'"¹³ What more terrible words to a man whose every activity revolves around his death?

Asbury and Hulga are prototypes of the overly proud characters who people the O'Connor stories and on whom her judgment never fails to fall. What they and characters like O.E. Parker in "Parker's Back" (1965), Calhoun in "The Partridge Festival" (1961), and Mrs. McIntyre in "The Displaced Person" (1954) have revealed to them is no clearer to the reader than the revelations of the grandmother, General Sash, or Mr. Fortune; but the finality of the judgments which fall on them is equally as grim

¹³O'Connor, "The Enduring Chill," Complete Stories, p. 381.

as their deaths would be. This represents for them what Flannery O'Connor had to face for fourteen years: life, however terrible it may be, must be lived day by day with little or no hope for any relief from grim malaise.

It remains a mystery what visions the O'Connor people see in their final moments, but it is interesting to note that the two instances in which she attempted to put the moments into words are in connection with two of her characters who have no proximity to death, who feel no physical pain, and whose suffering is purely psychological.

In "Revelation" (1964), one of O'Connor's final stories, Mrs. Turpin's vision seems to be prophetic, a vision for the inhabitants of the South, for the too-proud people who consider themselves superior to others and are thankful for the things that have not occurred in their lives. O'Connor was in contact with people of this type frequently throughout her life. The fact that Mrs. Turpin's vision comes as she has just completed the cleaning of her hog house and is observing these animals can be considered indicative of her thoughts about these persons. The vision itself clearly shows her feelings and what her idea of judgment for these people should be:

. . . 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. . . . They were marching behind the others with great dignity. . . . Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.¹⁴

Mrs. Turpin observes herself in this vision and is immobilized.

"The Artificial Nigger" (1955), reportedly one of O'Connor's favorite stories, represents the other occasion when she verbalized a character's vision. In this story Mr. Head is the pompous know-it-all who takes it upon himself to teach a lesson to his grandson, Nelson, and ends by learning the lesson himself. During a visit to the city, always a place of evil in the O'Connor stories, he denies that Nelson belongs to him and, in so doing, realizes his guilt before God. An epiphany of grace and of God's forgiving power comes to him as he views a plaster statue of a Negro in the yard of a house he and Nelson are passing. The statue represents to him the victory of Christ over His betrayers. Mr. Head's vision is pure and beautiful, because it lacks the horrible nearness of death and because it is the single instance in which O'Connor allowed herself to express spiritual thoughts in her fiction without cloaking them in mystery:

Mr. Head stood very still and felt the action of mercy touch him again, but this time he knew that there were no words in the world that could name it. He understood that it grew out of agony, which is not denied to any man and which is given in strange ways to children. He understood it was all a man could carry into death to give his Maker and he suddenly burned with shame that he had so little of it to take with him. He stood appalled, judging himself with the thoroughness of God, while the action of mercy covered his pride like a flame and consumed it. He had never thought himself a great sinner before but he saw now

¹⁴ O'Connor, "Revelation," Complete Stories, p. 508.

that his true depravity had been hidden from him lest it cause him despair. He realized that he was forgiven for sins from the beginning of time, when he had conceived in his own heart the sin of Adam, until the present, when he had denied poor Nelson. He saw that no sin was too monstrous for him to claim as his own, and since God loved in proportion as He forgave, he felt ready at that instant to enter Paradise.¹⁵

The reader never knows the outcome of Mrs. Turpin's revelation, but Mr. Head's philosophical vision results in the only true conversion for one of O'Connor's characters. These fictional epiphanies do not necessarily produce wisdom. The characters suffer, many die, all are forced to face their shortcomings; but most, with their abundance of pride, cannot possibly be made whole and sinless by one experience. In her own words, the important point is that her characters have had grace offered to them: "I have found, in short, from reading my own writing, that my subject in fiction is the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil."¹⁶

Of importance to her readers should be this jaundiced view O'Connor had of the world in which she lived, a point of view which must have been a direct result of the disease she was suffering. She held a similarly tainted idea about her readers: "I have also found that what I write is read by an audience which puts little stock either in grace or the devil. You discover your audience at the same time and in the same way that you discover your subject; but it is an added blow."¹⁷

¹⁵O'Connor, "The Artificial Nigger," Complete Stories, pp. 269-70.

¹⁶O'Connor, Mystery and Manners, p. 118.

¹⁷Ibid.

Redemption constitutes the necessary element in all Flannery O'Connor's stories. Speaking at Wesleyan College for Women in 1960, she said, "There is something in us, as storytellers and as listeners to stories, that demands the redemptive act, that demands that what falls at least be offered the chance to be restored."¹⁸ O'Connor gave this chance to each of her characters, thus fulfilling a very personal need, the symbolic cleansing of her own soul. Stanley Hyman feels that in finding herself in her characters, O'Connor rids herself of her shortcomings: "The stories are full of bitter hate in order that the author may be friendly and loving; the novels scream doubt and denial in order that the author may be devout and serene."¹⁹

The early stories, while still justifying the redemptive act, are not so full of the bitter hate, doubt, and denial of which Hyman speaks. The tone becomes violent in the later stories with the strange characters rapidly moving toward their damnation. The knowledge of the nearness of her own death influenced her obsession for the eschatological. Through unusual depiction of death for others, she was facing her own final moments and attempting to see, in advance, her last vision.

O'Connor protested at all times that her disease was not of any consequence to her writing. Betsy Lochridge writes that she said, "Most writers have had many obstacles put in their way. I have had none. . . . There has been no interesting or noble struggle."²⁰ But Sister Kathleen

¹⁸O'Connor, Mystery and Manners, p. 48.

¹⁹Hyman, p. 45.

²⁰Betsy Lochridge, "An Afternoon with Flannery O'Connor," Atlanta Journal and Constitution (November 1, 1959), 38-40.

Feeley notes that O'Connor had marked in her copy of Jung's Man in Search of a Soul, "There are hardly any exceptions to the rule that a person must pay dearly for the divine gift of the creative fire."²¹ She was either silent--or nonchalant--about her crippling disease: "In spite of her words to the contrary, all who knew her well affirm that her illness both debilitated the flesh and forged the spirit that was Flannery O'Connor's. Her fiction is the product of that spirit, which, because it was open to spiritual reality, saw all reality more clearly."²²

Miles Orvell contends that the violent endings of the O'Connor stories are required, not as a punishment for the protagonist but as a dramatization of the spiritual condition and a prerequisite to final insight,²³ an observation supported by O'Connor. In 1963, she told a group at Hollins College, Virginia, "I suppose the reasons for the use of so much violence in modern fiction will differ with each writer who uses it, but in my own stories I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. This idea, that reality is something to which we must be returned at considerable cost, is one which is seldom understood by the casual reader, but it is one which is implicit in the Christian view of the world."²⁴

²¹Sister Kathleen Feeley, S.S.N.D., Voice of the Peacock (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1972), p. 13.

²²Ibid.

²³Miles Orvell, The Invisible Parade (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1972), p. 15.

²⁴O'Connor, Mystery and Manners, p. 112.

Since she believed the creative action of the Christian's life was to prepare for his death in Christ, she put each of her central characters through the violence of death or something akin to death in order to gain this final insight and come a step closer to the spiritual condition. In O'Connor's words, "Life is a continuous action in which the world's goods are utilized to the fullest, both positive gifts and what Pere Teilhard de Chardin calls 'passive diminishments.'"²⁵ Flannery O'Connor's diminishment was extreme; death waited to stamp out a talent just coming into its own. In her short and disease-ridden life she combined her positive gifts and her "passive diminishments" to the fullest and wrote brutal, soul-shaking satire.

She had every intention of disturbing her readers: "I once received a letter from an old lady in California who informed me that when the tired reader comes home at night, he wishes to read something that will lift up his heart. And it seems her heart had not been lifted up by anything of mine she had read. I think that if her heart had been in the right place, it would have been lifted up. . . ."²⁶ O'Connor intended not to satisfy the tired reader, but to shock by using the unexpected: "I often ask myself what makes a story work, . . . and I have decided that it is probably some action, some gesture of a character that is unlike any other in the story. . . . This would have to be an action or a gesture which was both totally right and totally unexpected. . . . It would be a gesture which somehow made contact with mystery."²⁷

²⁵O'Connor, Mystery and Manners, p. 112.

²⁶Ibid., p. 47.

²⁷Ibid., p. 111.

While she contends that everything she wrote was intentional, it remains evident from a close look at her stories that her tendencies toward the morbid and bizarre and her obsession with finality were intensified by the fact of her suffering and the nearness of death.

CHAPTER IV
MOTIVATION IN O'CONNOR'S FICTION

There were numerous influences on Flannery O'Connor's writing apart from the ever-present knowledge of her early death. It must be decided, however, whether her illness intensified these influences. She admits to the two most important pressures: "The two circumstances that have given character to my own writing have been those of being Southern and being Catholic."¹

Her regionalism, while quite natural, was also intentional; for although she chose, when she was still able to make a choice, to live away from the South, she felt it important for a writer to write about his own region: "In the South we have . . . a vision of Moses' face as he pulverized our idols. This . . . is the knowledge that the novelist finds in his community. When he ceases to find it there, he will cease to write, or at least he will cease to write anything enduring."² The single story Flannery O'Connor wrote about an area other than the South is "The Geranium," the theme of which expresses the severe dissociation an elderly man experiences when forced to live outside his native Georgia.

Because O'Connor wished to live away from, but to continue to write about, Southern experience, it would appear that her illness did not intensify her regionalism. Her later stories are no more or no less

¹O'Connor, Mystery and Manners, p. 196.

²Ibid., p. 59.

southern oriented than the early ones; her revision of "The Geranium," for example, written shortly before her death, has the same setting as the original.

It would be quite difficult to attempt to separate O'Connor's regional and religious motivations, for life in the "Bible Belt" produces a deep concern for religious perspectives. While these inducements were present in O'Connor's works from the beginning, they were magnified by her forced return to the South and by the illness which kept her there.

Since O'Connor had always been deeply religious and a strong advocate of the three basic theological truths, the fall, the redemption, and the judgment, her early stories bear definite indications of these truths; it is the later works, however, that are saturated with them. Upon the realization that her own life would be cut short, O'Connor became preoccupied with these three Christian fundamentals, especially the act of redemption. Certainly there must have been the hope of a personal redemptive quality for Flannery O'Connor when she offered the chance of salvation to others.

The religious experiences of her characters are Protestant-oriented, even though O'Connor was raised a Roman Catholic. She felt that Protestant feelings were more intense, filled with fire and brimstone, and that the reader would feel a greater affinity with "backwoods prophets and shouting fundamentalists"³ than he would with the more polite, abstract elements of Catholicism. She explains, "The American

³O'Connor, Mystery and Manners, p. 207.

Catholic is short on places that reflect his particular religious life and his particular problems. This country isn't exactly cut in his image. Where he does have a place--such as the Midwestern parishes . . . these places lack the significant features that result in a high degree of regional self-consciousness. . . . So that no matter what the writer brings to them in the way of talents, they don't bring much to him in the way of exploitable benefits . . . in this the Southern writer has the greatest possible advantage. He lives in the Bible Belt."⁴ She continues, in the same lecture: "The Catholic has the natural law and the teachings of the Church to guide him, but for the writing of fiction, something more is necessary. . . . Catholics have over-emphasized the abstract and consequently impoverished their imaginations and their capacity for prophetic insight."⁵

The Protestant South, according to O'Connor, has a definite distrust of the more abstract qualities of Catholicism and a dependence on the grace of God, supported by a feeling that evil is something to be endured, not simply a problem to be solved. All this made Protestantism her rationale rather than Catholicism and also saved her from any guilt feelings about not writing of her own religion. Dealing with these Christ-haunted, sin-ridden oddities apparently minimized her personal fears and made them less frightening. If, in her capacity as a writer, she could hold out to so many perverse characters the chance of redemption, how easy it must have been to believe in a sympathetic God offering that same assurance to her.

⁴O'Connor, Mystery and Manners, pp. 200-201.

⁵Ibid., pp. 202-203.

Flannery O'Connor never openly criticized her mother's protectiveness, but her resentment is explicit in her stories. Regina O'Connor was a dominant force in her daughter's life and is the domineering, self-centered stereotype of all the fictional O'Connor women. Mrs. O'Connor's influence, not noticeable in the stories written before 1950, was inescapable, because Flannery O'Connor was a semi-invalid from the time she left the hospital in 1951 until the time of her death. She had to be dependent on someone; and her mother, the only close relative or friend she could turn to, was the logical choice. It remains doubtful whether Flannery O'Connor consciously cast her mother in the role of heroine of her stories, just as it is doubtful whether Mrs. O'Connor ever recognized herself in this role. In nine of the stories, the hard-working widow, and often mother, can be seen trying to keep farm or home operative despite great adversity. Seldom does this woman manifest any praiseworthy traits.

Regina O'Connor may have dominated her daughter's life during her high school and college years, thus prompting O'Connor's desire to live away from home after she completed her studies at Iowa State. Comments made by Mrs. O'Connor indicate that she felt her daughter could do no wrong--a certain cause for the daughter to rebel against perfection of any sort and to write about all the things she never allowed herself to do.

In addition to these determinant factors in the quality of her fiction, Flannery O'Connor had an unusual personality. She never possessed an out-going or social nature and had an odd sense of humor. Often forced into social amenities by her mother, she rebelled in her own way.

Josephine Hendin tells of O'Connor, at the age of nineteen or twenty, being invited to a wedding shower for a family friend and refusing to sit, standing with her back against the wall, scowling at the other women who sat down to lunch: "She didn't exactly 'fuss,' but neither did she 'do pretty.'"⁶ The defiance shows up later in her stories when her characters perform such startling acts as throwing books in a doctor's reception room, purposely setting the woods afire, smoking in a sterile dairy barn, or climbing into the hayloft for a sexual encounter with an itinerant Bible salesman.

Josephine Hendin sees O'Connor's surrounding herself with peacocks for pets as a form of release for this rage. These beautiful birds "broke all the rules" by gobbling up Regina O'Connor's flowers and berries, ravaging the flower beds and shrubs, leaving their droppings all over the lawn, and shattering the serenity of the country night with their raucous cries.⁷ She surrounded herself with some thirty of these creatures which were possessed with a determination to do only that which pleased them.

The peacocks also represented a beauty which O'Connor knew she lacked. She had caricatured her physical appearance, as well as her strangeness, while an undergraduate at Georgia Women's College, in a cartoon showing herself wearing huge glasses and sitting alone with couples dancing around her. She is smiling cheerfully and the caption reads: "Oh well, I can always be a Ph.D."⁸

⁶Hendin, p. 14.

⁷Ibid., p. 15.

⁸Ibid., p. 9.

Later, when the effects of lupus become noticeable, she continues to joke about her condition and her appearance. To the Fitzgeralds she writes, "I am doing fairly well these days, though I am practically baldheaded on top and have a watermelon face."⁹ In another letter a year or so later, she mentions a new development: "I am walking with a cane these days which gives me a great air of distinction . . . I now feel that it makes very little difference what you call [the disease]. As the niggers say, I have the misery."¹⁰ Other letters show her attempts to laugh at herself: "I am only a little stiff in the heels so far this winter and am taking a new kind of ACTH, put up in glue. . . .",¹¹ and "I have gotten a kind of Guggenheim. The ACTH has been reduced from \$19.50 per bottle to \$7.50."¹² About her diet, too, her comments were humorous: "The Maple Oats really send me. I mean they are a heap of improvement over saltless oatmeal, horse biscuit, stewed kleenex, and the other delicacies that I have been eating . . ."¹³ Perhaps the jocular tone of the letters to friends hid a deeper pain which her southern upbringing forced her to keep to herself, but the letters also reveal her bizarre humor.

⁹Fitzgerald, p. xvii.

¹⁰Ibid., p. xviii.

¹¹Ibid., p. xv.

¹²Ibid., p. xvi.

¹³Ibid., p. xvii.

The isolation imposed on O'Connor by her illness did not cause a great difference in her way of life, as she had chosen from girlhood to live in some sort of seclusion. She didn't have close friends in her early life; and later, during her stay with the Fitzgeralds, she had a separate apartment, while the farm itself was quite isolated. She joined the Fitzgeralds for meals and sometimes in the evenings for drinks and lengthy discussions.

The friendship with these people and with other literary friends was later carried on through correspondence. It is in these letters that the same strange wit which prevails in her stories can be seen. O'Connor set herself up as the country bumpkin and once again hid her true feelings behind this facade. The letters reveal her wit; the stories, however, divulge the bitter, hidden feelings.

While corresponding with friends like Richard Stern, she carried her play-acting to extremes with such comments as, "Our springs done come and gone You just ought to leave that place you teach at and come teach . . . where you could get something good to eat. . . . I think of you often in that cold place among them interleckchuls."¹⁴ Again in a letter to Stern she admonished him for working too fast: "What are you fixing to do, publish another novel? Do you want to be known as One-a-year Stern? I am doing my best to create the impression it takes 7 years to write a novel. The four-hour week. You are not helping the Brotherhood. Examine your conscience. Think. Meditate. Shilly-shally."¹⁵

¹⁴Hendin, pp. 10-11.

¹⁵Walters, p. 16.

Letters such as these may have temporarily convinced the receiver of Flannery O'Connor's good-natured acceptance of her infirmity, and this seems to have been her intention. It is not necessary to have documented proof of whether O'Connor purposely revealed her deeper feelings in her stories. These feelings erupt in the fiction and flow together into what would seem to be an obsessive bent for violence, an unwarranted violence. Unwarranted, that is, until one looks at the silence with which Flannery O'Connor accepted such traumatic experiences as the loss of her father, domination by her mother, and a slow, agonizing death. Then there are reasons for everything in the O'Connor stories.

The grotesque characters actually become caricatures of many things she recognized within herself and those close to her. The dominated characters--Asbury, Joy-Hulga, Thomas, Julian, and the idiot-child, Lucynell--are all, like Flannery O'Connor was, totally submissive to and dependent on their mothers. Although the desire to rebel is there, O'Connor shows that the punishment for daring to do so far exceeds the reward or the price of resentment. (Interesting to note is the fact that the tyrannical mother is inflicted with compensatory punishment also.)

O'Connor's loneliness finds parallels in many of her characters. Bevel, Old Dudley (Tanner), General Sash, and Norton represent the ultimate in detachment, and all come to a tragic end, unable to discuss their problems with anyone who cares. Her predilection for death shows in the various manners of expiration which she imagines, for these characters and several others, most of them much worse than the one she

was personally approaching. And her own disfigurement surely accounts for her having no beautiful figures in her works and also for the abundance of such articles as wooden legs, corrective shoes, hearing aides, and braces for teeth.

Being forced to pretend a sociability she did not feel led her to give her characters free reign to be every odd sort imaginable: non-productive writers, tattoo fanatics, misguided psychologists, permanent adolescents, fake preachers, wooden-legged Ph.D.'s, nymphomaniacs, murderers; the list could go on and on. It is as if Flannery O'Connor held up to the world every possible manifestation of "real life" with which she was familiar.

While many of O'Connor's motivations for writing were present before her illness, these same forces were certainly intensified by her inability to lead a normal life and by her knowledge of the chances of dying while still a young woman.

CHAPTER V

COMPARISON OF "THE GERANIUM" AND "JUDGEMENT DAY"

The radical change in Flannery O'Connor's fiction can best be seen in a comparison of two of her short stories: "The Geranium" and "Judgement Day." "Judgement Day" is supposedly a revision of the earlier story, although there is very little in one that is reminiscent of the other.

It would be quite difficult for anyone to read and compare the two stories without noting the hopelessness which permeates the second story and is only hinted at in the first. A close look at the two stories will reveal the changes, while an even closer look at Flannery O'Connor will disclose the reasons for these changes.

The single distinct likeness lies in the person of Old Dudley, called Tanner in the second story, a displaced Southerner "held captive" in a Yankee city. In "The Geranium" Old Dudley does not relish his situation of having to live with his daughter in the North, but he feels none of the desperation of Tanner, who plans to get back to the South in any way he possibly can. Dudley's basic daily occupation is watching a geranium plant which sits on the window ledge of an apartment across the alley. It is a pale-pink geranium with green-paper bow and the only sign of life in the jungle of city buildings. The geranium does not represent life to Dudley, however; he sees it as comparable to "the Grisby boy at home who had polio and had to be wheeled out every morning and left in the sun to blink."

Within this framework lies the real story of Dudley's encounter with the Negro in the apartment next door. This is where the theme lies, and it is here also that O'Connor's drastic change in the tone of the two stories becomes most evident. Old Dudley does not like the idea of living in the same apartment house with a "nigger," but to be patronized by that person is almost more than his old mind can tolerate. While the kind Negro offers help to Dudley in the hall outside their two apartments, the geranium falls to the ground in the alley. Dudley's great distress over being patronized by a Negro and the fall of the geranium is compounded by uncontrollable tears which are witnessed by the owner of the lost geranium. He defies Old Dudley to go down and pick up the broken flower, but Dudley, despite his desire to tend to the flower, cannot risk another meeting with the Negro. The "neighbor" across the alley threatens Dudley, from the window, concerning his constant peering into his apartment. "I only tell people once," he warns as the story closes.

"The Geranium" ends on a menacing note but bears no comparison to the sheer hopelessness experienced by Tanner in "Judgement Day." This hopelessness is felt from the beginning of the story: "Tanner was conserving all his strength for the trip home. He meant to walk as far as he got and trust to the Almighty to get him the rest of the way. That morning and the morning before, he had allowed his daughter to dress him and had conserved that much more energy. . . . With the energy he had conserved yesterday letting her dress him, he had written a note and pinned it in his pocket: IF FOUND DEAD SHIP EXPRESS COLLECT TO COLEMAN PARRUM, CORINTH, GEORGIA."¹

¹O'Connor, "Judgement Day," Complete Stories, p. 531.

"Judgement Day" is the only one of Flannery O'Connor's stories which has a winter setting. The "thin" snowflakes fall as Tanner looks out the window of his daughter's New York apartment. Tanner doesn't have even the faint green of a pitiful geranium to offer to him a memory of home. He has only his dreams of things as they used to be and his vision of things as they will be again. His hopes are in vain, however, for it soon becomes apparent that Tanner has recently suffered a stroke and is almost incapacitated. He can barely move one foot in front of the other to walk inside the apartment, much less outside.

When he does manage somehow to get out of the apartment, his encounter with the Negro is quite different from that of Old Dudley's. Tanner assures himself that he always has been able to handle "niggers" and will be able to handle the one next door also. What he fails to realize is that he has been used by Negroes all his life, nor is he able to see how this new Negro in his life handles him.

The Negro actor is most unkind to Tanner and causes him to suffer another stroke. After this stroke, his recovery is filled with thoughts of "going home" any way he can get there. Tanner doesn't fear the thoughts of arriving in a coffin, as long as he gets back to the South. One thing does remain extremely important to Tanner, however; he must not be buried in the North. He exacts from his daughter a promise not to bury him there. Her insincere promise gives another note of hopelessness to the story. This false, impatient daughter bears little resemblance to Dudley's daughter in "The Geranium," but her attitude adds an element of despair.

The Negro neighbors in the two stories also represent entirely different types. The neighbor in "The Geranium" is kind and helpful to Old Dudley, while the one in "Judgement Day" is arrogant and purposely cruel to Tanner. It is not clearly spelled out at the end of this story that the Negro actually killed Tanner. Not knowing the old man's state of health, the actor did, however, push Tanner's head through the stair rails, resulting in his death by another stroke. Flannery O'Connor leaves the reader with the problem of finishing this part of the story for himself, as she often leaves her readers with missing elements to ponder whenever they think of her fiction.

She does not, however, leave any question in the reader's mind about Tanner's daughter. Just as expected, she buries her father in New York. The story doesn't end with the daughter's living in a private hell because of her failure to keep her promise; she realizes her mistake and has her father's body moved from New York back to Georgia: "She buried him in New York City, but after she had done it she could not sleep at night. Night after night she turned and tossed and very definite lines began to appear in her face, so she had him dug up and shipped the body to Corinth. Now she rests well at night and her good looks have mostly returned."²

Thus ends one of O'Connor's last stories, a far, far different story from the original version written almost twenty years earlier. While it is true that any writer might seriously alter a story written many years previously, it is doubtful that it would be changed into such a hopeless tale unless there were some definite reason. O'Connor had that reason.

²O'Connor, "Judgement Day," Complete Stories, p. 550.

When Flannery O'Connor wrote "The Geranium," she was a very young woman just finishing work on her graduate degree. She was away from home for the first time in her life and anticipated an exciting future as a writer. Although she had not published any of her stories, her talent had been proven by her scholarship at Iowa State. The seven stories submitted as partial requirement for her M.F.A. were all stories about the South, with the exception of "The Geranium." She was writing about the region and the people she knew best; this would not change.

The theme of her stories did change, though, because three short years after she received her degree, Flannery O'Connor was stricken with the crippling disease which drastically affected the direction of her life. Not only was she forced to give up an active pursuit of a career, but she was also forced to return to a life from which she had sought to free herself. For the next thirteen years, she suffered physically and mentally and, no doubt, spiritually. This suffering shows in her stories and culminates in her revision of "The Geranium."

"Judgement Day" lacks the softness and the hints of kindness of the earlier story. There is no goodness or happiness, not even the mere trace of a pink geranium. Old Tanner's coffin-dreams bear hints of those earlier dreams of Tarwater in The Violent Bear It Away. Tarwater's dreams were humorous, while his ideas about how he was to be buried were as definite as those of Tanner. It strikes the reader agreeably to read, "I ain't going to die in bed," the old man said. 'As soon as I hear the summons, I'm going to run downstairs. I'll get as close to the door as I can. If I should get stuck up there, you'll have to roll me down the

stairs, that's all."³ Tarwater's words come from the depth of the coffin he has built himself and which he is trying on for size. Try as one might, it is difficult to detect any humor in old Tanner's dreams of rising from his coffin to shout to all standing around, 'Judgement Day!' Perhaps Tanner's dreams are too far-fetched. Once this poor old man is put into his coffin, he'll never rise to shout anything again, nor will he immediately be consigned to his native soil.

Tanner's thoughts of getting outside the apartment building are hopeless. Nothing is left in life for this old man, just as very little was left for O'Connor at this point. She did manage though to concoct one final ironic situation--one that is far removed from the original broken flower pot and voiced threat from a neighbor. Tanner was completely "done in" by the Negro actor whom he mistook for Coleman, his old friend. He was found dead on the stairway outside his apartment with his head jammed between the railings. Tanner's judgement day had come. O'Connor had dreamed up another macabre death for one of her characters.

This final story in O'Connor's last collection culminates all she had been striving to say throughout her career as a writer. Tanner has managed his passage by the dragon without ever losing confidence that he is "on his way home." In his final vision, while he mistakenly identifies the Negro actor as his friend back home, he brings to the forefront the juxtaposition of the two Negro types. The actor is the personification of all that is evil in O'Connor's characters. He represents the diabolical, just as the young girl does who throws a book

³ Flannery O'Connor, Three by Flannery O'Connor (New York: New American Library), p. 311.

at Mrs. Turpin and calls her an old wart hog, the Bible salesman who steals Joy-Hulga's leg, the boys who set fire to Mrs. Cope's woods, and the child Mary Fortune who "whips" her grandfather; all are evil. None is as evil as the Negro actor who pushes Tanner's head and arms through the stair rails and proves the old man's accusations that he was a "Nigger from back home" as he reverts to his former speech patterns: "Ain't no judgement day, old man. Cept this. Maybe this here judgement day for you!"⁴

Tanner doesn't lose his confidence, even after the Negro's tirade about no judgement day, for he asks the actor for help: "'Hep me up, Preacher, I'm on my way home.'"⁵ Without knowing that he is doing so, as he reacts to the old man's nickname for the Black, he helps him "up" by causing his death. Death for Tanner would be a successful passage from the sinister world of the city, with its equally evil inhabitants, into that other world of his coffin dreams.

Tanner's death lacks none of the usual macabre O'Connor imagination, but it does represent the fulfillment of what the old man was seeking--a way out of this present existence. Flannery O'Connor herself must have been looking for a similar answer in what had become by this time an unbearable life.

From the pale-pink geranium of her earliest writings, O'Connor had, because of what fate had dealt her, come through stories of faith or the lack of it, redemption and the rejection of it, and death and

⁴O'Connor, "Judgement Day," Complete Stories, p. 549.

⁵Ibid.

life-in-death, to a final encounter with the devil. Her stories are full of devils; she felt that "the devil accomplishes a good deal of groundwork before grace is effective."⁶ In some of her stories Satan's groundwork is so well laid that he wins the day; but, in the seemingly hopeless case of Tanner in "Judgement Day," the old man's faith never falters and at least he is assured victory over the devil.

Flannery O'Connor, at this time, had surely gained a confidence which she had somehow been searching for while writing her other stories. She had gone through all kinds of hell and had put her characters through similar tortures, but she always offered the moment of grace to these characters.

The vision of judgement day which Tanner has is not revealed; its similarity to "going home" is indicated, and the reader feels from Tanner's jaunty tone of voice that he is happy and satisfied. The fact that the Negro is left in a public hell, where he seeks acceptance and equality, shows O'Connor's confidence in leaving her readers to a world of captivity while her own freedom was close at hand.

⁶ O'Connor, Mystery and Manners, p. 117.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Driskell and Brittain, in The Eternal Crossroads, assert that after learning of her illness, O'Connor " . . . [regarded] death itself in a more personal, less abstract way than she did earlier."¹ Even the few critics, like Martha Stephens, who attempt to deny or discredit the fact that Flannery O'Connor's illness affected her writing, admit to the serious change in early and later stories: "One does not know what in her private life helps to account for the fact that this writer who began so normally was to adopt so fierce and forbidding a mode of fiction in all her subsequent work, but in any case there is in the early pieces nothing importunate, accusatory, or prophetic . . ."² Miss Stephens makes note, too, of the autobiographical traits in the fiction and of the fact that the monsters and grotesques of the later works are conspicuously absent in the early stories, where only occasionally do people do unexpectedly mean things.

Since a patient suffering from a chronic disease like lupus erythematosus is quite often plagued with organic neurologic disturbances which manifest themselves in various ways, it is reasonable to assume that Flannery O'Connor's fiction became her outlet for obsessional reactions to her disease. Knowing that her father had died with the

¹Leon Driskell and Joan Brittain, The Eternal Crossroads (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1971), p. 12.

²Stephens, p. 95.

same disease she contracted in 1950, O'Connor became infatuated with the thought of her own death, thereby concocting all manner of strange ends for her characters. Along with this fanaticism came an intensification of the natural Christian (and Catholic) passion for redemption and judgement. These three elements--death, redemption, and judgement--abound in the O'Connor fiction from 1952 until her death in 1964.

Flannery O'Connor holds a place among the best Southern fiction writers. While her body of work is small, it is nonetheless exceptional as a regional genre and a good representation of religious satire. Her craftsmanship and capability had been established before her illness; it is her outlook which altered sharply and affected the subsequent tone of her novels and stories. And it is in this outlook that her major restriction lies. The stories all take a similar direction, leading toward death and revelation. They are peopled with such repellent characters that they all but mask the humor which she doubtlessly intended. There comes a point in reading the O'Connor fiction where one understands the meaning of Caroline Gordon's statement: "People continued to wish that they could meet at least one 'attractive' person in her stories, but they kept on reading."³

We do, as Miss Gordon said, keep on reading. Maybe we are looking for that one attractive person or trying to find some note of happiness in the O'Connor fiction; perhaps, however, in the perverse and the violent we recognize distorted images of ourselves and we read on to see our fate revealed. Flannery O'Connor's most productive years were

³ Caroline Gordon, "Heresy in Dixie," Sewanee Review, 76 (Spring 1968), 267.

of pain and soul-searching; perhaps she intended for us to share
pain and to search our own souls to see if any small revelation of
s grace could be found there.

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