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A PARABOLIC EXPLANATION OF
FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S SHORT FICTION

by
Sarah E. Toombs
"

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the Division of Humanities and
Fine Arts of Incarnate Word College in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

San Antonio, Texas
May 1981

This Thesis for the Master of Arts Degree


by

Sarah E. Toombs

has been approved for the

Division of Humanities and Fine Arts of
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by



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Author Gift

Acknowledgments

I first became aware of Flannery O'Connor's fiction in 1978, in a creative writing class at Northwestern. Four years earlier, a New Testament class introduced me to parables via Dodd's analysis. Although not the first to synthesize the writings of O'Connor with Jesus' parables, I hope my analysis will help others understand them, singly and together, as artists. To claim to increase insight into the theological position of either would be unrealistic, requiring more gall than even I could muster.

Many people have helped in the writing of this thesis, aiding my work more than most of them realize. I give my thanks, first, to Dr. Sam Toombs, whose financial assistance kept me in coffee and erasers these long months; to Sarita Gonzales, Monica Machac, and Sandra Zorilla, who graciously listened to what must have sounded like mad mutterings during the long formative months; to Irma Cuellar, Mary Beth Miller, and Eileen Sheridan, who helped me with the logistics; to Paul Brenner, Victoria Hrutkay, and Kathy Zeiler, who freely gave valuable literary advice; and, of course, to Dr. Bernard O'Halloran, Sr. Helena Monahan, and Sr. Ann Semel, who took the time from their already overcrowded schedules to become midwives to this project. To these, and to the entire Incarnate Word community, I owe more than I can repay. Sharing the Centennial Year has truly been an honor and a delight.

To all those who lent their aid and to the memory of Flannery O'Connor, who taught me more than I can articulate, this thesis is, with all humility, dedicated.

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Chapter I

The Problem and Its Scope

The Problem

The purpose of this study is to integrate seemingly disparate and divergent criticisms of Flannery O'Connor's short stories. The method chosen to achieve this end involves comparison of selected short stories with the parables of Jesus. Criticism of both parables and short stories will be compared in order to find similarity of characteristics, function, theme, and artistic intent. The characteristics will be compared to determine what similarities can be found in the internal mechanisms of the stories: in plot, in structure, in characters, in setting, and in those elements which seem to defy what otherwise looks like realism. The function of the parables will be applied to the stories to determine if both fictions have the same or similar effect on the reader, and to determine whether any common themes can be found in the works of the two writers. Finally, the works of the two authors will be compared for similarity in literary qualities or intent. This study will focus on recent parabolic study, critical opinion on O'Connor, pertinent

essays by O'Connor, and four representative stories. From this data will be drawn some tentative conclusions and recommendations for further study.

Delimitations

Certain areas of parable study are not applicable to the purposes of this study. Some of these are the question of the genuineness of the sayings of Jesus;¹ the primary meaning of a parable, that is, the meaning which is historically applicable in the context of Jesus' ministry;² the scholarly debate over parabolic setting; and other problems, such as textural comparison among the gospels. The researcher assumes the position of the informed layman, drawing from what seems to be consensual opinion in parabolic exegesis. This paper deals with Jesus as artist, and not with aspects of his divinity.

The differences between Jesus and O'Connor are important. The most obvious of these are cultural and sexual. Their lives are separated by nineteen centuries and the chasm of gender. Whereas Jesus was a preacher, O'Connor was a writer. The stories of Jesus, therefore, come to the reader first through an oral tradition, while the texts of O'Connor have been written and approved by the writer herself. No

theory can provide conclusive evidence to determine this original order. On the other hand, O'Connor's stories are easily separated according to date of composition. Biblical scholars disagree on everything from what constitutes a parable to what hermeneutical tools to use.³ But O'Connor's work is classified as narrative fiction, and textural integrity - thanks to the modern convenience of the typewriter - is sure. Finally, Jesus' intent when composing the parables can be known only indirectly. But O'Connor, through her letters and occasional writings, makes clear her intent for the purpose and the primary meaning of her stories.

As vast as are the differences in the lives and artistic careers of Jesus and O'Connor, even more profound are the similarities which link them across the ages. Both died young, in their thirties. Both sensed their early end. Jesus knew his career would be cut short by the fear and cowardice of others; O'Connor understood her time was limited by the lupus she inherited from her father. Jesus' parables carry an acceptance of his mission; O'Connor, too, had an abiding faith which lay beneath her writings. The knowledge of his end may have deepened Jesus' resolve to carry out his mission; O'Connor's work shows how illness similarly forged her spirit. Feeley notes: "Her fiction is the product of that spirit, which, because it was open to spiritual reality, saw all reality more clearly."⁴

In relation to their literary output, Jesus and O'Connor show marked similarities. According to May, O'Connor recognized and accepted the possibility that her work would be misunderstood, as was that of Jesus.⁵ O'Connor herself somewhat cynically remarked that the "intelligent reader today is not a believer" and "does not really understand the character motivated by faith."⁶ In fact, parables and stories are both limited in number and restricted to a few obsessive themes. Neither author bothered with the sweeping tide of human events. Their chief concern was the eternal and ever-eminent question of the salvation or damnation of a single soul. The center of an O'Connor story is "invariably the word of revelation spoken to the protagonist that either achieves conversion or announces simple condemnation."⁷ So, too, do the parables of Jesus encounter the reader and force him into a similar situation.

Certain, perhaps arbitrary, criteria were used to select the O'Connor stories in this paper. The desire to preserve the integrity, subtlety, and complexity of the works required a strict limitation of the number of stories. May notes that the dramatic center and function of the language are essentially the same in O'Connor's short stories and novels, but these elements are easier to extract from the stories.⁸

The earliest stories, those composed before Wise Blood, were excluded because they lack the clarity of artistic

intent found in the later works. May states that the parabolic technique is more evident in the stories in Everything That Rises Must Converge, but more effective in the stories in A Good Man Is Hard to Find.⁹ Since both clarity and efficacy have their advantages, stories are included from both collections. Using both periods helps balance the view of O'Connor's parabolic tendencies.

The length and subject matter of the stories presented another factor. For the purpose of brevity and simple presentation, stories which were very long or had developed subplots were omitted. "The Displaced Person," a critical favorite, was abandoned for this reason. By excluding such problem stories, the author could have weighed the scales in favor of her thesis. However, May has tackled all these stories in his book The Pruning Word; his interpretations do not conflict with this study.

Length of another sort was also a problem. The most famous of O'Connor's stories, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," fits in well with the thesis, but the critical work is so voluminous that to include it would slight any other story discussed. Also, some critics do not consider this story representative, its popularity deriving mainly from its shocking effect.¹⁰ Since the purpose of this study is to integrate various interpretations into some ordered scheme, the use of stories on which there is critical disagreement was desirable.

Fortunately, disagreement on O'Connor is never very difficult to find.

Other popular stories were excluded by virtue of their special properties. "The River," "The Artificial Nigger," and "The Lame Shall Enter First," with their emphasis on racial issues or free will in children, do not address themselves directly to the issue of this paper.

What, then, are the virtues of the stories included in this study? "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," "Good Country People," and "Revelation" all contain some action in the story which shocks the reader and simultaneously defines the story. Their characters - freaks, intellectuals, prophets, and children - are as representative of O'Connor's characters as any group could be. Finally, the stories have an appeal, a freshness which pulls the reader into them and makes the stories linger in the mind long after than have been read. This last seems sufficient motivation to study any literary work.

May's book, The Pruning Word, deserves some mention at this point. May's thesis, as he says of "Revelation," is that "the hermeneutic structure stands dramatically as a saving device among men: it nevertheless illuminates existence at its very core. Such is the effect of O'Connor's tales analogous to the parables of Jesus."¹¹ May's book is the most complete study of the relationship between the world of New

Testament scholarship and the study of O'Connor's work. The book analyzes O'Connor's stories very carefully, providing a description of each which runs about four pages.

However, there are serious weaknesses in May's book which, while not detracting from his excellent and insightful work, must be mentioned. The individual elements in the stories, such as plot character, and setting, are obscured in favor of an examination of the meaning of O'Connor's stories. Thus, the effect of the stories eclipses the individual elements and the process involved. The analysis of the stories is basically an overview, no doubt the function of time and space limitations. However, ordering the book story-by-story ignores any point-by-point similarity which might exist between the two writers' work. May does not explain the state of parabolic study, which increases the reader's difficulty in accepting his statements on the New Hermeneutics. This practice shortens both the work and one's understanding of the comparison. May's argument is weakened as a result.

Why Study Parables?

The study of the parables of Jesus in conjunction with O'Connor's stories helps explain and resolve some of the problems which O'Connor's fiction presents.

The first problem with O'Connor's stories concerns

reconciling what May calls "appreciation blocked by disbelief."¹² Critics are ready to praise the stories for their power, but they cannot synthesize great art and orthodox faith. Martin explains the modern paradox:

Devout faith in the mysteries of Christianity is suspect, but the framework of Christianity, the body of Christian myth, its symbols, its prophecies, and its sacraments contribute the vocabulary most used by contemporary critics to describe the themes and structure of literature of all kinds.¹³

This inability to reconcile faith and criticism causes interpretations characterized by fragmentation and excessive attention to minor details. Thus, O'Connor's religious vision brings up the aesthetic problem of validity of interpretation. O'Connor's fiction challenges the modern separation of art and belief by refusing to make sense in this unnatural separation; O'Connor herself fought the concept by vehemently opposing compartmentalization in her essays.¹⁴ Nonbelief, then, results in textural distortion.

The second problem which faces the O'Connor critic is the proliferation of material approaching these stories from some philosophical stance. In the analyses of Eggen Schweiler and Hendin, the fiction is used to prove the prominence either of Christian humanism or of a sullen, repressed Southern feminist. Studies such as these, while making important points, run the danger of destroying the work's integrity. Rarely

do these critics reintegrate the fiction after they have dissected it. As with the kingdom of God, the violent do indeed bear it away.

Another unsolved problem is the determination of the effect of O'Connor's stories on modern literature. Similarly, great difficulty arises when attempting to determine the effect of a given story on any given reader, or the variables which make each reaction different. This problem leads to the main difficulty of O'Connor's fiction: placing the work in the literary frame of reference from which criticism necessarily removes it. As May points out, O'Connor is not classified as a Southern writer.¹⁵ She herself recognized the mistake of lumping her with "that mythical entity, The School of Southern Degeneracy." She wrote, "Every time I heard about The School of Southern Degeneracy, I felt like Br'er Rabbit stuck on the Tarbaby."¹⁶ O'Connor's place is with other writers of grotesque fiction, notably Nathaniel West.¹⁷

Although O'Connor's output tends to make her a minor writer, her effect on literature was major because of her refusal to abandon literary and religious tradition. The primary witness of her effect is the disproportionate number of articles and books written on a relatively small and thematically limited output. Thus, May concludes that O'Connor's importance may not lie in the writing per se but in the controversy and lack of consensus of opinion which indicates "a crisis in literary criticism."¹⁸ Whatever the eventual decision of posterity,

O'Connor seems to intrigue present critics.

The critics agree that her writing balances the holy and the demonic, faith and reason, matter and spirit.¹⁹ Can one therefore assume that O'Connor consciously and deliberately followed the form of New Testament parables in her writing? Her concern with the meaning of the eternal set in the context of the temporal coincides most immediately and clearly with that of Jesus. In the stories of both, "religious meaning is structured in terms of human conflict symbolizing man's relationship with God," revealing that "life is gained or lost in the midst of everyday existence."²⁰ However, even if form and concern coincide, one cannot conclude conscious imitation. May states that the New Testament "literary form that her art imitates is the parable" but data from her library suggests that O'Connor, though widely read in philosophy and theology, was probably not familiar with the works of the New Hermeneutics.²² "Even though O'Connor's theory is worlds apart from the New Criticism and the New Hermeneutic, her fiction tells a different story."²³ While parabolic study did not begin with the New Hermeneutics, this school explains the relation of O'Connor's work to its meaning, while older scholarship shows her work's relation to reality.²⁴ Thus, both views have a part in this study.

One may assume, then, value inherent in studying the parables of Jesus with the stories of O'Connor. This type

of study may bring together facets of O'Connor's work which have been ignored or only treated marginally by critics. Also, further study can establish correlation of points between the parables as a whole and representative stories, a part of the interpretation ignored or omitted by May.

Definitions

This paper is divided into an examination of characteristics and functions of the literature. The author acknowledges the artificiality of this division, agreeing with Tolbert that "form and content, though distinguishable, are inseparable."²⁵

The characteristics of the literature may be defined as those parts of a story which may be examined individually and independently of any interpretation. This category includes plot, character, and setting, those things which, like the "little organs" of the "frog in a bottle," are dissected from the "literary specimen" in "most English classes."²⁶ These elements deal with the "manners" of the story, with how the story is told.

The functions of the story may be defined as those parts which result from or directly apply to an interpretation of the story. This category includes thematic tendencies and the ever-tenuous area of authorial intent. These elements are the "mystery," involving the story's purpose.

The term "New Hermeneutics" may be defined as that study of the parables which emphasizes their literary value rather than their allegorical meanings. May holds it to be that portion of parabolic scholarship he takes as authority, that is, the American work done in the last thrity years. Fortunately, the bulk of exegetic literature of the last century "represents as satisfactory an example of the 'process of consensus in interpretation as one can find within the limits of sacred or profane literature.'"²⁷ For this reason, and also for the sake of spatial limitations, statements made by biblical scholars on the parables will be taken at face value, and not supported by examples or explanations in this text. It is understood that such explanations and examples may be found in the source materials.

The author assumes a working knowledge of the O'Connor stories from which examples are drawn. Therefore, plots, characters, and general situations (e.g., how Hulga came to lose her real leg) are assumed.

NOTES FOR CHAPTER 1

¹Geraint Vaughan Jones, The Art and Truth of the Parables (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1964), p 51.

²Norman Perrin, Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), p. 137.

³Mary Ann Tolbert, Perspective on the Parables (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), p. 16.

⁴Sister Kathleen Feeley, Flannery O'Connor: Voice of the Peacock (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1972), p. 13.

⁵John R. May, S.J. The Pruning Word (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Univ. Press, 1976), p. xxv.

⁶Flannery O'Connor, Mystery and Manners (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), pp. 181-2. Future notes will identify this work by OC-M.

⁷May, Pruning, p. 20.

⁸May, Pruning, p. 20.

⁹May, Pruning, p. 60.

¹⁰Arthur Voss, The American Short Story (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1973), p. 334.

¹¹May, Pruning, pp. 113-14.

¹²May, Pruning, p. xviii.

¹³Carter W. Martin, The True Country (Nashville: Vanderbilt Univ. Press, 1969), p. 11.

¹⁴May, Pruning, p. xiv.

- ¹⁵May, Pruning, p. ix.
- ¹⁶OC-M, p. 38.
- ¹⁷May, Pruning, p. xix.
- ¹⁸May, Pruning, p. xiii.
- ¹⁹May, Pruning, p. xx.
- ²⁰May, Pruning, p. xxiv.
- ²¹May, Pruning, p. xxiv.
- ²²May, Pruning, p. 16.
- ²³May, "Flannery O'Connor and the New Hermeneutic." The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin, Autumn 1973, p. 42.
- ²⁴May, "Flannery O'Connor and the New Hermeneutic," p. 42.
- ²⁵Tolbert, p. 71.
- ²⁶OC-M, p. 108.
- ²⁷May, Pruning, p. xv.

Chapter II

Parable and Metaphor

Past Understanding of the Parable

Determination of the working definition of a parable is by far the most important and most difficult area of parabolic scholarship. In classical rhetoric, a parable is a prolonged simile involving one point of comparison. Abrams defines it as "a short narrative presented so as to stress the tacit but detailed analogy between its component parts and a thesis or lesson that the narrator is trying to bring home to us."¹ Parables, like metaphors, compare a lesser-known with a better-known element.² They may be simply defined as "the group of stories told by the Jesus of the gospels which the Christian tradition through the centuries has referred to without distinction as parables."³ Tolbert further notes their "certain timeless dimension."⁴ Parables are difficult to describe or define, but easy to recognize.

The standard interpretation method of parables was allegorical, providing a point-for-point comparison between elements in the story and a contemporary, external situation. Gould, in 1896, first suggested that parabolic meaning might arise from the impression made by the whole rather than from the accumulated meaning of the separate parts.⁵ Later, Dodd

extended the idea by pointing out that a parable has only one point of comparison, and therefore cannot be an allegory.⁶ However, although the meaning of a parable is not limited to that of allegory, Jones points out that the allegorical elements in Jesus' sayings need to be recognized.⁷ Some interpreters believe that parables function like myths in that both reveal "something not reducable to a clear language."⁸ Their "permanent value and significance" lie in their success in presenting "positively or negatively paradigmatic types" which demonstrate "the kind of behavior which is or is not required of a man."⁹ However, while the myth represents a truth or vision in the framework of an impossible or unusual story, a parable is neither impossible nor outside the realm of ordinary experience.¹⁰

Similarly, parables do not fall into the genre of fables because fables deal with animals in a situation normally involving people. Animals generally do not appear in parables, and when they do, they do not engage in conversation, as they do in the typical fable.

The Hebrew word for parable is mashal, a term whose meaning includes comparisons, maxims, pithy sayings, riddles, and stories which have the quality of a "dark saying."¹¹ The mashal was employed by the rabbis to explain some facet of the law, defend a personal interpretation, or attack the interpretation of an opponent.¹² The typical mashal had only

one meaning.¹³ Although some similarity exists between contemporary rabbinical parables and those of Jesus, the parables of the rabbis "do not show the variety and creativeness of the Gospel parables, which are the work of a superbly inventive and creative mind."¹⁴ No stories in the New Testament, and few in the Old, come close to the singularity with which Jesus handled this limited, peculiar literary genre.¹⁵ So Jesus, although not inventing the parabolic form, is the only rabbi using it with such a degree of originality.

What, then, is this parable of which Jesus was so fond? A parable can be considered a story singular in language and literary form which is centered around a metaphor.¹⁶ Jülicher noted the two parts of a parable: the matter (Sache, in German), which is the real concern of the parable, and the picture (Bild), with which the matter may be compared.¹⁷ In this respect, parables are very close to O'Connor's dichotomy of mystery and manners (i.e., the eternal and the temporal). The parables belong to the genre of narrative art,¹⁸ but cannot really be called short stories. One critic calls them "little narrative-cameo[s] of life."¹⁹ Another asserts:

the most useful and perhaps the most acceptable understanding of a parable at the present time is the following: a parable is that short, unified story, embedded in a longer gospel narrative, that one chooses (or the tradition has chosen) for various reasons to call a parable.²⁰

This more plastic, less formal definition seems to be current; a parable is understood to be at least partially undefinable, and therefore the definition is somewhat vague.

Harrington noted the importance of allowing the story to exist on its own terms by avoiding too rigid a system of classification.²¹ But the scholar should beware. Just as the parable is not an allegory, so too it is not a metaphor. Although "a parable at its semantic level functions similarly" to a metaphor,²² to equate the two leads to "unfounded assertions and exaggerated claims of power for the parables."²³ Metaphor is "an appropriate model to help illuminate and disclose the 'web of relationships' that constitute the parable."²⁴ So, although some critics will use the two terms as either side of an equivalent equation, to discuss metaphor is merely a tool to fuller understanding of the parable, a wholly other quantity.

What is a Metaphor?

Perrin notes two kinds of metaphors. The first is merely a teaching device in which the information is the primary element. This kind of metaphor uses the listener's participation only perfunctorily, and is easily reduced to a saying. The other kind of metaphor is one which imparts understanding from out of the totality of the experience of hearing it.

Information is secondary to and dependent upon the experience of the metaphor.²⁵ The whole story is an information-unit, irreducible without harming both the art of the story and the information it relates.

Similarly, O'Connor's stories are to be understood holistically. She emphasized that fiction "demonstrates something that cannot be demonstrated any other way" than through the entire event of the story.²⁶ Although her stories are short, they are not therefore "slight." She maintained: "A short story should be long in depth and should give us an experience of meaning."²⁷ Eggenschweiler acknowledges that a short plot description of the stories "seriously distorts" her work, which indicates "how fully concrete her fiction is."²⁸ Orvell attacks the view of O'Connor's fiction as pereplatitudes:

O'Connor's best tales usually cannot be reduced to some specific theological formula - that would be to do less than justice to the weight of complexity they bear. Rather, they culminate in an image that is true dramatically, psychologically, and morally.²⁹

In addition, Feeley agrees with this understanding when she discusses critical tendencies to dissect O'Connor's fiction:

In his introduction to Everything That Rises Must Converge, Robert Fitzgerald warns against treating Flannery's stories as 'problems for exegesis or texts

to preach on.' It is a valid caution; such treatment would wrench apart the fictional work, which was conceived as a totality.³⁰

Thus, O'Connor's stories, like the parables, are an irreducible entities.

Uses of the Metaphor

Why does one use a metaphor when a direct statement would do as well? Perrin explains that

the poet who turns to symbol and metaphor does so because of some vision of reality which demands expression, and which can only find expression in such evocative or mind-teasing language.³¹

O'Connor simply wrote: "You tell a story because a statement would be inadequate."³² This statement cannot express what the artist does by penetrating "the concrete world in order to find at its depths the image of its source, the image of ultimate reality."³³ This complexity of vision (and the resulting problem of expressing such complexity in simple terms) is possible only in the artist who integrates faith and vision. O'Connor knew that disconnecting faith from vision does violence "to the whole personality, and the whole personality participates in the act of writing."³⁴ Thus, the first reason for writing metaphorically is that this

method can express ideas inaccessible to the realistic, descriptive mode.

The second reason for using metaphor is because of the intense creativity of the writer. Dodd calls metaphor "the natural expression of a mind that sees truth in concrete pictures rather than conceives it in abstractions."³⁵ This topic of concreteness of vision will be more fully developed in Chapters 3 and 5.

One interesting characteristic of a metaphor is that it participates in the reality it bears. More than a sign, the metaphor forces the hearer (or reader) to both learn about and participate in the experience of the metaphor, which invades him. "Jesus' speech had the character not of instruction and ideas but of compelling imagination, of spell, of mythical shock and transformation."³⁶ The reader is compelled to experience the story on a more than passive plane.

Similarly, O'Connor understood her stories to be more than entertainment. She wrote:

Some people have the notion that you read the story and then climb out of it into the meaning, but for the fiction writer himself the whole story is the meaning, because it is an experience, not an abstraction.³⁷

One critic called "GCP" typical in that it "brings the reader face to face with both the mystery of human personality and a mystery yet more ultimate."³⁸ Another critic, speaking

of O'Connor's irony, calls it "sacramental, not because it works with the stuff of religious belief and non-belief, which it does, but because it itself operates as a vehicle of revelation."³⁹ O'Connor's understanding may have been aided by her reading of Dorothy L. Sayers' essay "Toward a Christian Aesthetic" in which Sayers explains that the artist "reveals his experience by expressing it, so that not only he, but we ourselves, recognize that experience as our own."⁴⁰ Thus, O'Connor seems to have clearly understood story as both creative act and ongoing process.

Another effect of a metaphor is that it conveys the belief behind it. Harrington believes that the "faith content" is the most central and eternal element of the parables, revealing "what believing existence must mean."⁴¹

In the same manner, O'Connor's existential insistence upon extremes allows "for no aesthetic compromise but call to belief." Her language is kerygmatic

in the sense of the New Testament gospels: within the trappings of myth, parable, and metaphor is the core of a message that demands interpretation and receives immediate interpretation through the juxtaposing with familiar, popular, even banal discourse.⁴²

The effect can be startling. Donohue describes the after-effect of such transmission of meaning:

We are left uneasy because the artistic ambiguity summons up the most frightening dilemmas of human existence, presents them with an explosive dramatic tension, but leaves us to face multi-leveled ironic explorations of the human psyche that are capable of endless extensions of meaning. We are pitched headlong with all of the objective correlatives signalling "GO" into the prickliest of journeys - man's dark odyssey into an alien world.⁴³

Thus, O'Connor's stories seem to transmit their message with a startling directness.

Summary

In determining a working definition of a parable, one must first turn to parable scholarship, in which there has been much disagreement. Parables may be understood as having allegorical properties; in addition, they partake of the qualities of metaphor, although not metaphors per se. Parables are neither myth, fable, nor typical Hebrew mashal; in a sense, Jesus created his own genre when he spoke his parables. While parable does not equal metaphor, it is useful to discuss them interchangeably, with some reservations.

Metaphors may be strictly pedagogic or they may be such that the message can be gleaned from them only by the total experience of the story. O'Connor's stories, too, cannot be reduced without some violence being done to the meaning as a

result.

A metaphor is used by the artist who cannot express the complexity of reality in a direct statement. Metaphor arises from the profoundly creative personality and participates in the reality to which it bears witness. In so doing, the metaphor communicates the faith upon which it stands, sometimes with shocking results.

NOTES FOR CHAPTER II

- ¹M. H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981), p. 6.
- ²Tolbert, p. 43.
- ³Tolbert, p. 16.
- ⁴Tolbert, p. 13.
- ⁵Jones, p. 10.
- ⁶C. H. Dodd, The Parables of the Kingdom (New York: Scribner's, Rev. Ed. 1961), p. 7.
- ⁷Jones, p. 109.
- ⁸Perrin, p. 157.
- ⁹Jones, p. 157.
- ¹⁰Perrin, p. 158.
- ¹¹Wilfrid J. Harrington, O.P. Parables Told by Jesus (New York: Alba House, 1974), p. 6.
- ¹²Perrin, p. 123.
- ¹³Harrington, p. 6.
- ¹⁴Jones, p. 68.
- ¹⁵Jones, p. 57.
- ¹⁶Perrin, p. 89.
- ¹⁷Perrin, p. 93.
- ¹⁸Jones, p. 119.
- ¹⁹Jones, p. 80.
- ²⁰Tolbert, p. 17.
- ²¹Harrington, p. 5.
- ²²Tolbert, pp. 43-4.
- ²³Tolbert, p. 41.

²⁴Tolbert, p. 44.

²⁵Perrin, p. 158.

²⁶OC-M, p. 75.

²⁷OC-M, p. 94.

²⁸David Eggenschwiler, The Christian Humanism of Flannery O'Connor (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1972), p. 20.

²⁹Miles Orvell, Invisible Parade (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1972), p. 27.

³⁰Feeley, Voice, p. 13.

³¹Perrin, p. 130.

³²OC-M, p. 96.

³³OC-M, p. 157.

³⁴OC-M, p. 181.

³⁵Dodd, p. 5.

³⁶Wilder, in Perrin, p. 130.

³⁷OC-M, p. 73.

³⁸Preston M. Browning, Jr., Flannery O'Connor (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1974), p. 70.

³⁹Judith F. Wynne, "Sacramental Irony in Flannery O'Connor," Southern Literary Journal, Spring 1975, p. 35.

⁴⁰Feeley, Voice, p. 16.

⁴¹Harrington, p. 14.

⁴²Robert Detweiler, "The Curse of Christ in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction," Comparative Literature Studies 3 (1966), 238.

⁴³Agnes McNeill Donohue, "The Numinous Vision of Flannery O'Connor," Critic, Spring 1976, p. 42.

Chapter III

Structural Devices and Internal Elements

Plot

Scholars classify the parables in various ways. Bultman,¹ Jones,² Crossan,³ and Vía⁴ are some of the structuralist critics who tend to analyze the parables in terms of whole genres of literature. Perrin explains that "the very nature of the parables of Jesus as texts tends to make the application" of such methods problematic because the parables "form a corpus of texts very limited in number and of a highly specialized type."⁵

One of these systems employs a comic/tragic dichotomy. According to Vía, the plot action takes one of two directions: it either comically rises to an affirmation and inclusion of the protagonist in the community, or falls tragically to catastrophe and the exclusion of the protagonist.⁶

One critic calls O'Connor's vision "comic, in the classic sense: bawdy, pessimistic, absurd."⁷ O'Connor herself cautioned that "the maximum amount of seriousness admits the maximum amount of comedy."⁸ For a model she turned "to a form of comedy more primitive than that of Aristophenes, or one might say that she has returned to the very source of comedy."⁹ Her own

faith seems to support this assertion, for she once wrote that only "if we are secure in our beliefs can we see the comical side of the universe."¹⁰ Orvell notes this underlying seriousness. "As she fuses Word and flesh in her writings, so style joins comic and gravely serious modes."¹¹ Another critic finds her

stories are about the way rigid and dead souls are given the chance to live; I think they are about the coming to life. Therefore, I think that comedy is the real genre of the works, specifically divine comedy, God's turning evil into good.¹²

Jacobsen sees "a terrible and complete comedy" inextricably bound with tragedy.¹³ Similarly, Browning finds her stories "imprinted with the tragic/comic destiny of Man."¹⁴ Martin's assertion approximates the consensus opinion: "because of the convergence of humor and horror, her work may be considered generically as tragi-comedy, the most Christian of genres."¹⁵ The grace of the eternal in the face of man's sinfulness provides the comedy; man's rejection of the possibilities inherent in salvation provides the tragedy.

Another element in the parables is their essential mode of operation. Via notes that they typically involve an encounter or confrontation. This meeting, usually between two characters, includes dialogue.¹⁶

In discussing the paradigmatic O'Connor story, critics deal with her confrontation-moment. Her stories follow the

pattern "of the prototypical Christian experience" in moving from sin (through recognition, repentance, confession, and penance) to absolution.¹⁷ Detweiler believes the confrontation fuses plot to spiritual concerns as the

inevitability of the encounter with Christ in Miss O'Connor's fiction takes form in the individual assumption of guilt and the struggle to rid oneself of it. That process can best be described in terms of action, for in her art the structure of action usually imitates the pattern of spiritual action that involves judgement or grace.¹⁸

Critics recognize the importance of the moment of confrontation in O'Connor's stories.

However, they disagree as to the typical O'Connor story. One calls "the climatic exchange between the confidence man and his youthful avitar"¹⁹ the dramatic center of the stories. Another sees the stories as showing a con-man tricking a competent woman out of her possessions, seducing her and her daughter by appealing to their vanity.²⁰ A third believes they dramatize sinfulness and the need for grace through "an epiphany in which the main character recognizes his need for repentance and either accepts or ignores the opportunity."²¹ Coffey finds themes of proud intellect, corrupt heart, and sexual sin forming a morality play "in which Pride of Intellect (usually Irreligion) has a shattering encounter with the Corrupt Human Heart (the Criminal, the Insane, sometimes the Sexually Demonic) and either sees the light or dies, sometimes both."²² Whatever

the paradigm, encounter and confrontation, with dialogue, always present.

Construction

As with plot, certain structural modes are characteristic in the parables. Bultman notes a primary element is the economy with which the stories are told. Extremely short in length, they rarely contain more than two characters.²³ Tolbert finds "a sharp economy in the presentation of character agents and plots."²⁴

O'Connor wrote prose that was "powerful, economical, and elegant."²⁵ She herself referred to the paradox "that the larger and more complex the personal view, the easier it is to compress it into fiction."²⁶ One cannot use the "arithmetic of word-measure or the geometry of symbolic configurations" to describe her work.²⁷ Her technique is so adept that length is unnecessary:

With very little room for maneuver--most of her stories are about twenty pages long --she achieves transitions and even reversals of tone with remarkable speed, and she can show in people who have been almost preposterously flat a sudden visionary capacity.²⁸

Another credits "her medieval sense of the correspondentia or the ancient 'sympathy of all things'" with her ability to compress her subject matter into "one or two physical settings

and a few hours' duration."²⁹ Another finds her fiction to be "engaging precisely because it is so simple."³⁰

Bultman finds the parables contain no parallel action; they deal with strict chronological time.³¹ Parabolic events happen sequentially, never simultaneously.

O'Connor was no Joyce or Faulkner; she was not interested in producing experimental fiction. Her stories follow strict chronological order, as in this daydream section of "A Temple of the Holy Ghost."

"How does a child like you know so much about these men?" Susan asked and pushed her face up close to the mirror to watch the pupils in her eyes dilate.

The child lay back on the bed and began to count the narrow boards in the ceiling until she lost her place. I know them all right, she said to someone. We fought in the world war together. They were under me and I saved them five times from Japanese suicide divers and Wendell said I am going to marry that kid and the other said oh no you ain't I am and I said neither one of you is because I will court marshall you all before you can bat an eye. "I seen them around is all," she said.³²

O'Connor's shifts occur in tone and point of view, not in time or space.

The parables are often not finished. The ending, when taken for granted, is not given.³³ Similarly, O'Connor's stories typically end on the razor's edge, with the character being offered grace, seeing it, but not having made the decision

to accept or reject. Although the plot ends, the imagery points to the character's probable decision.³⁴ Notes Orvell: "the tales stop short at the moment of perception itself."³⁵

"A Temple of the Holy Ghost" ends in hope for the girl, since her last prayer is devoid of the snideness which principally characterized her previous behavior.³⁶ In "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," as one critic observes, "We are left to imagine for ourselves the fear and suffering awaiting the girl upon awakening alone and lost in a strange place, as well as the anxiety and regret of the old mother."³⁷ The ending of "Good Country People" stops short of describing Hulga's final recognition, leaving the reader "to construe the meaning of the experience by looking back and again looking back at the various implications of the action."³⁸ Feeley extrapolates:

The residue of "Joy" which remains in Hulga becomes a wry humor, perhaps her saving grace.... The humorous remarks suggest that Hulga would realize the ridiculousness of her situation at the story's end - deserted in a barn loft far from the house, with her wooden leg stolen--and that she would renew her claims to Joy.³⁹

This unconcern with the final outcome indicates that O'Connor "is far more interested in the juncture in men's lives when grace is made available to them and [in] the drama of their decision regarding the offer" than in the eventual outcome of the effect of grace.⁴⁰ Perhaps she is more interested in

the momentary meeting because she is less sure of the outcome of the individual encounter than of the eventual one.

In constructing the parables, Jesus seems to have paid much attention to unity and balance. Jones notes the parallelism of the "thought rhyme" of parables and elaborately analyzes the structure of the Prodigal Son.⁴¹ He rebuts the notion that the parables were "flung off, as it were, in the heat of the moment as instruments of controversy or defense." If that were the case, "they must have been conceived with a spontaneous artistry unique in the history of literature."⁴² Harrington also notes careful construction in the contrast parables of Mark 4,⁴³ all of which indicate "ultimate success in spite of manifold hindrance."⁴⁴ Whether polished or spontaneous, Jesus' parables show a careful attention and sensitivity to construction.

O'Connor could use structure for her own ends. Feeley notes that "Good Country People," a perverted love story, is distorted in form as well as content, since the main antagonists do not meet until the story is two-thirds over.⁴⁵ The triad of recurring images--the tree-line, the sun, and the color purple--"represents an existential awareness and a spiritual process."⁴⁶ The stories rely on paralleling opposites such as hatred and love, sinfulness and self-righteousness, a hatred of and a longing for Christ.⁴⁷ The deceptively simple pattern of action in these stories can be broken down

into three actions. First, a character brings the protagonist a warning of grace or judgement; the conflict involves salvation or damnation through the acceptance or rejection of each other by the main character and his alter ego; then, the story's climax equals the moment of grace.⁴⁸ One critic notes the deceptive quality of the prose:

seemingly artless, it conceals a precise modulation of rhythms and periods, a concretely evocative vocabulary, a use of sound patterns to reinforce imagery, and a precise notation of speech... In general, the range of her style, which has been little appreciated, is quite wide, and wholly adequate to the range of her vision.⁴⁹

Part of this effectiveness comes from O'Connor's "absolute sureness of timing"⁵⁰ which subtly but effectively directs the reader's response.

Characters

Parabolic characters are, before all else, simple. They usually possess one major trait, in either speech, action, or mode of dealing with others.⁵¹

O'Connor's characters all possess "ignorance or its spiritual equivalent, maniacal zeal."⁵² O'Connor knew the power of a character's personality to form the story,⁵³ always stressing the "inner coherence" of her literary children.⁵⁴ Whether Pentecostal fanatics, militant atheists, religiously

unconcerned, or conventionally religious,⁵⁵ her characters have the economy of description which makes them memorable. "She could put everything about a character into a single look,"⁵⁶ having "a genius for catching the psychological attitude of her characters in brief, penetrating descriptions and bits of dialogue."⁵⁷ One example is her self-righteous woman. Browning finds her portraits of "female exemplars of self-intoxication" contain "an unerring sense of the mot juste necessary to expose their moral flaccidity and spiritual emptiness."⁵⁸ No gesture or descriptive feature was extraneous.

Shiftlet and Mrs. Crater are described by one critic as two sides of the same coin, knowing "more about the heart as restless spirit or demonic agent" than they let on to each other.⁵⁹ Hulga is concerned purely with the reactions and impulses of her mind, to the exclusion of any feeling "so that her weak heart is clearly and ironically more than a physical disability."⁶⁰ Hulga and her mother compliment each other in their ironic vulnerability to Manley Pointer.⁶¹ Ruby Turpin is an externally good woman who "tends to take back with her mind what her hands have offered."⁶² One critic considers the common factor in O'Connor's obsessed characters to be

the person of Jesus. He is the force which has thrown off all the calculations of the secular consciousness. Often here His image appears like a reflection in agitated water, distorted, stretched, contracted, broken, but always the object of the eye's focus.⁶³

Whatever their major trait, these characters are all ultimately concerned with something they would like to ignore but cannot escape.

Another trait of parabolic characters is their representative quality. Tolbert explains that "many of the stories employ the indefinite article ('a certain man,' 'a certain city'), which gives them a marked generality in tone."⁶⁴ Except for Lazarus, they are all nameless.⁶⁵ Jones asserts that the artistic power of the parable is such that they need no names, being endowed with "the quality of time-and-space-transcendence" which is "typical of all great narrative creations." Therefore, these characters exist in their own right; one thinks of them "as if they possessed the momentum of a historical existence of their own: as if their creator had liberated them into the universal consciousness of man."⁶⁶ They seem to possess life on the order of historical existence as a person, rather than that of a mere literary creation.

More than one critic sees the universality of O'Connor's strange collection of characters. Often, they are recognized as not average, but essential Man, forced to see and accept the outer limits of his own nature.⁶⁷ Most of them, despite "error, corruption, and malice" are "for the most part representatives of fallen mankind, never worthy but always subject to grace and eligible for redemption."⁶⁸ One critic finds them either obsessed with God or

empty whitened sepulchres almost always teetering on the brink of hungry hell-fire. Few are elected for a searing salvation. And the lukewarm are spat out of her mouth just as violently and with as little pity as the Gospel Jesus promises.⁶⁹

O'Connor recognized her characters' unpopularity, and defended them and her region as "Christ-haunted."⁷⁰ Solotaroff finds something akin to "pristine Christianity" in her "wierd procession of teenage prophets, backwoods nihilists, and demented acolytes, as well as orphans and widows, frauds and psychotics." They are

the creatures of a vision, and though their speech, manners and dress bespeak the Bible Belt, their real existence is meant to lie in the eternal mysteries of sin and redemption, which they grotesquely and usually blindly enact.⁷¹

Another critic calls them allegorical as that form is understood in C.S. Lewis' The Allegory of Love, representing "distinct inner forces" indicating that they externalize inner conflict on the literal level.⁷²

The characters individually are also representative. Shiftlet and Pointer are variations on the folk character of the con man and jack-of-all-trades with "metaphysical restlessness"⁷³ while Lucynell Crater, in her sweetness and docility, is "a strange and distorted symbol of spiritual innocence."⁷⁴ Mrs. Turpin, who thinks she understands life, eventually comes to know she understands the least.⁷⁵ Mrs. Crater is one of

the type of "the grandmother, mother, or widow who fails miserably in her domestic role."⁷⁶ As such, she may be a comic parody of the Mother of God. Helpless Hulga is "the epiphany of pathetic humanity with divine aspirations."⁷⁷ The child in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" illustrates the recurring O'Connor motif that "God-fearing, humble parents, no matter how ignorant or shiftless, will generally produce psychologically and morally sound children" since, despite "her first stirrings of pride and her adolescent conflicts" the girl is "essentially pious" in attitude.⁷⁸ No matter how individual these characters are, they always seem to point to some psychological or moral reality outside themselves, often a reality of which they are unaware and unable to articulate.

Jesus' parables are for and about the poor. "The hallmark of Jesus' preaching of the Kingdom was: 'the poor have the good news preached to them.'⁷⁹ O'Connor shared this abiding concern. She tended to link poverty in her mind with deformity of body and spirit. She once wrote:

when I look at stories I have written I find that they are, for the most part, about people who are poor, who are afflicted in both mind and body, who have little - or at best distorted - sense of spiritual purpose, and whose actions do not apparently give the reader a great assurance of the joy of life.⁸⁰

She used literal poverty to express "a poverty fundamental to man" the basic "experience of human limitation."⁸¹ She

indicated that "the actual poor only symbolize ... the state of all men."⁸²

Critics perceive O'Connor's penchant for poverty and freaks to create "modern instances of the Christian paradox, the Sermon on the Mount."⁸³ Grotesque features, whether deformity and feeble-mindedness, illness and disease, or animal and machine imagery, indicate the moral or spiritual condition of the character.⁸⁴ Just as the stumps of Hulga and Shiftlet indicate their spiritual lack of completion, so the hermaphrodite indicates humanity's fallen state.⁸⁵

Another parabolic feature is the notably secular behavior of the characters.⁸⁶ People seem to go about their daily business rarely seeking, often not interested in, God or salvation. Daily life, rather than eternal salvation, occupies their time.

Many of O'Connor's characters exhibit similar spiritual inertia. Although O'Connor is deadly accurate in her criticism of the secular characters⁸⁷ she also "insists upon recognizing the strengths of these people ... particularly their capacity for grace and redemption."⁸⁸ The rigidity of social convention, notably in "Revelation," provides a contrast for the departure from the expected when it occurs.⁸⁹ The O'Connor secular character, in the words of one critic, is

a person either grounded in fundamentalist Christianity or confirmed in rationalistic denial of Christianity, and groping towards some form of redemption or relief, frightened all the while lest the unexpected, the non-probable, or the wonderful intrude upon and disrupt the plotted patterns of his self-defined world.⁹⁰

In their dealings with Christ, these characters try to manipulate, deny, ignore, or accomodate Him in order to avoid the painful reality He brings.⁹¹ Such evasion means God can only reach these characters by violent means, by "gate-crashing into their lives."⁹² O'Connor's basic sympathy for the secular character does not include a mindless pity which excuses or ignores faults.

Javalet points out that "the more devastating the abomination, the more numerous and magnificent the prophets are. Christ met face-to-face the abomination of the entire history of all men."⁹³ The presence of the demonic or those who express evil is never ignored by God.

In O'Connor, too, both evil and its antidote are found in great abundance. The source of evil is always either deception or self-deception, both indicative of alienation from self, God, and community.⁹⁴ One critic shows how evil is an antidote for secularism:

Simple and sophisticated, male or female, these tepid humanists usually share one debatable talent. They have cooked up the clichés of modern sociology or psychology, ersatz existentialism or a kind of pubescent angst, which they ladle out in stultifying doses to their doubtful benefactors. It is a poisonous diet, killing the spirit and sometimes the flesh. Luckily for Christ, one might say, the real nihilists, various versions of the Misfit, appear in the later stories, keeping Him alive in the minds and hearts of men, by denying Him with a vengeance.⁹⁵

O'Connor would have agreed: "To insure our sense of mystery, we need a sense of evil which sees the devil as a real spirit" and not just as "vague evil."⁹⁶ The mystery of the devil is that he "accomplishes a good deal of groundwork that seems to be necessary before grace is effective."⁹⁷ Often, a "passionate belief in the truth of the divine Word" coexists with "a passionate commitment to the demonic principle" in the same character.⁹⁸ These demonic figures "incarnate the face and living presence of a chaotic, destructive, and dark principle of evil in the world,"⁹⁹ often experiencing the mercy of God "through demonic structures that oppose or caricature their own forms of idolatry."¹⁰⁰ Their influence is pervasive:

they run the gamut of corruption: ignorance, moral blindness and self-righteousness, outlandish deceit and hypocrisy, cynicism, hedonism, outright atheism, and evil so profound as to be nothing less than satanic. The proliferation of such characters gives a flavor to Flannery O'Connor's work which has horrified some critics and readers; to them it would perhaps seem surprising that the spiritually unsound characters and the thoroughly evil ones should be the starting place for the consideration of the religious content of Miss O'Connor's fiction.¹⁰¹

Such characters are as necessary as they are impossible to ignore.

Manley Pointer, although he disburses evil under the guise of selling Bibles, brings Hulga the shock and resulting vision which reveals her self and her philosophy as empty and

superficial.¹⁰² Shiftlet is both a grotesque parody of Jesus and a demonic character¹⁰³ who distorts the message of the Incarnation, perverting "the primacy of the spirit over the letter of the law; the freedom of man to use his moral intelligence; and the hard demands of love"¹⁰⁴ to suit his own desires. However, one cannot deny that such demonic characters "act as apiritual catalysts, administering the shock which awakens the positivists and the positive thinkers from their dream of a world made secure by superficial rationality or conventional goodness."¹⁰⁵ But for them, many characters would never see their own latent evil.

O'Connor's prophets are characters whose concerns she considers both "central to human life" and identical with her own.¹⁰⁶ Their imaginative vision makes them "realists of distances" who perceive "the realism which does not hesitate to distort appearances in order to show a hidden truth."¹⁰⁷ Collectively, they show "the author's theme that true Christian grace is so rare a quality in contemporary society as to be viewed as abnormal or grotesque."¹⁰⁸ Another critic agrees by citing the one difference

between O'Connor's prophet freaks and those of the Scriptures is that where the precursors "were seen by their contemporaries as inspired men," the modern heirs are seen by their contemporaries as madmen.¹⁰⁹

In fact, O'Connor "exalts" these characters who, as "natural

beings with supernatural powers ... assert a unity of purpose and a consistency in point of view that more complicated, more 'rational' minds are incapable of." In a world of pure reason, they offer a hope both more practical and more utopian than that of the rationalists.¹¹⁰ The prophets provide a counterbalance to both secular, modern characters, and evil, perverted ones.

Setting and Realism

The parables are "occasional, transitory, essentially fleeting snapshots of life."¹¹¹ As such, they rely heavily on normal occupations and activity to which anyone can relate.¹¹² The parables show the applicability of Jesus' message.

Elaborates Jones:

Through them the words of Jesus are seen to be for all time and are universal because the things they describe are familiar, universal, and independent of time: digging, ploughing, keeping servants, war, seeking justice, exercising mercy, celebrating weddings, and so forth. Nor does the form exceed the content at the expense of thought. The images are like life, without exaggeration or caricature.¹¹³

The parables, then, can be understood, at least on a literal level, by virtually any person who encounters them.

O'Connor strove for the same accessibility. She knew to start "where human perception begins" appealing to the senses,

the Christian writer's orthodoxy must, therefore, be apparent in a sound dramatic presentation, not applied to the story for the sake of edification, and not achieved through gratuitous and tortured indirection.¹²³

The setting, then, gives the sense of place, social structure, distinctive language, concrete details, religious tradition, and religious concerns which mark O'Connor's work.¹²⁴

The parables of Jesus celebrate the unrepeatable reality of each day, each person, each situation. They "are unique in that they convey the vibrance of Everyday in the simplest of terms; they are filled with a clarity of vision - Jesus' own - which has cherished all ordinary things and persons in creation."¹²⁵ Jesus' delight in mundane details of life is found in his stories.

O'Connor also loved those things peculiar to her time and place. Her sacramental view of life "invests each moment and even the most insignificant event with an importance worthy of its being shaped and given form through the medium of art."¹²⁶ Her view of her own mission as a writer was characteristically humble:

Fiction is the most impure and the most modest and the most human of the arts. It is closest to man in his sin and his suffering and his hope, and it is often rejected by Catholics for the very reasons that make it what it is. It escapes any orthodoxy we might set up for it, because its dignity is an imitation of our own, based on our own free will, a free will that operates even in the teeth of divine displeasure.¹²⁷

She allowed her characters the same freedom of change and movement allowed humanity. In her stories, "she offers us particulars, but they have the look of universals. Her characters are excruciatingly individualistic, but do they not seem to perform as types?"¹²⁸

The parables of Jesus are well-known for a naturalism faithful to nature, society, and experiential reality.¹²⁹ The realism, according to Wilder, is the parables' major literary component, forcing the reader awake.¹³⁰

O'Connor's realistic tendencies extend to all aspects of her characters. She revels in dialect, although her written comments are somewhat restrained. "The sound of our talk," she wrote, "is too definite to be discarded with impunity."¹³¹ Her realism in capturing the speech patterns of her characters has sometimes led critics to call her style bald and graceless.¹³² Her characters are "firmly planted in her native Georgia soil, evincing all the nuances of locale and custom with which she was so familiar."¹³³

The locale receives equally detailed attention. Although her landscapes are more than temporal,¹³⁴ "she eschews literary manipulation of symbols, even as she eschews any moral obligation to society in her fiction."¹³⁵ Nature provides both "a backdrop for her action" and a contrast to "the image of eternity and permanence with the flux and violence of the world of men."¹³⁶ One example occurs in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," as a critic explains:

Here, as in most of her stories, O'Connor underlines the fact of man's perversity by showing that he is surrounded by the manifestations of God in nature. The sun, birds, mountains, sky, and moon all reflect God's presence but they fail to make any real impression on the obtuse Shiftlet.¹³⁷

O'Connor's vision and interpretation of the countryside provide "the outward features and the natural actions" which "are the signs of inward and spiritual grace."¹³⁸ However, O'Connor's use of the setting to illustrate underlying truths never sacrificed narrative veracity.

Improbable Elements

Improbable elements are those aspects of the parables which shock or otherwise throw the reader off guard, such as the beam in one's eye. They defy the otherwise strict realism of the stories. "At first glance, the parables appear to present a realistic picture; however, the realism is just as often exploded by an extravagance in detail and description."¹³⁹ Brouwer notes that they occur in most parables.¹⁴⁰ Javalet calls them the obstacles which allow the jump of faith because "those things which astonish and scandalize are important."¹⁴¹

In O'Connor's fiction, the improbable element is often called grotesque. O'Connor used "distortion" to explain

mystery indicating her interest "in possibility rather than in probability."¹⁴² She felt the key to a good story was an action "totally unexpected, yet totally believable," one "which indicates that grace has been offered."¹⁴³ Her perception of reality involved, as she wrote, "a descent through the darkness of the familiar into a world where, like the blind man cured in the gospels, he [the writer] sees men as if they were trees, but walking."¹⁴⁴ O'Connor understood the difficulty of relating her vision. She wrote:

When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal means of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock - to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures.¹⁴⁵

Certainly, these "large and startling" drawings have drawn the most comment, both negative and positive, on O'Connor's work.

Grotesqueness may be understood as "some deviation from an explicit or implicit norm" residing "in physical attributes, actions, or situations" or as "verisimilitude or rhetorical overstatement."¹⁴⁶ Orwell recognized this element in "that unsuspected moment that comes in almost every story when something surprising happens, when the tone changes from that of comedy and satire to something quite other -- when an

offhand gesture inadvertently ignites a bombshell."¹⁴⁷ One critic finds her stories not supernatural but "thoroughly parabolic."¹⁴⁸ May finds both an "eschatological mood of revelation" and an "apocalyptic tone of the imagery" to supplement the violence which "definitely conjures up the tumultuous atmosphere of the 'last days.'"¹⁴⁹ Another critic sees her repeatedly employing the shock of evil

in the hope that, finally, by plunging into those fearful psychic depths she might bring up some evidence that, in a time marked by moral chaos and ontological deprivation, it was yet being, not absurdity, which would have the last word.¹⁵⁰

Although somewhat lacking in faith, this comment accurately reveals O'Connor's use of the unusual to confirm the ultimate goodness of God.

This element which shocks the reader may be described as the juxtaposition of the parable, and the clarity it brings, with the paradox, and the confusion it threatens.¹⁵¹ In other words, the shocking element poises the listener between possible chaos and possibly increased vision.

O'Connor saw her use of the grotesque as a means of illustrating the threat of goodness. She wrote:

Most of us have learned to be dispassionate about evil, to look it in the face and find, as often as not, our own grinning reflections with which we do not argue, but good is another matter. Few have stared at that long enough to accept the fact

that its face too is grotesque, that in us the good is something under construction. The modes of evil usually receive worthy expression. The modes of good have to be satisfied with a cliché or a smoothing-down that will soften their real look.¹⁵²

O'Connor planned her stories and knew, with their violent and troubling endings, they were neither what the reader wanted nor what he expected.¹⁵³ Her narrative irony comes from "the disparity between the sacramental object of action and the revelatory grace it brings."¹⁵⁴ The stories pull, as in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," in two directions: on the one hand, man is a temple of the Holy Ghost; on the other, he is deformed, warped by his own sin.¹⁵⁵ One critic explains the audience need:

The history of philosophy is a history of the setting up of categories.... But categories, as we all know, have a way of not being absolute. Our rational selves want the category, want it fixed and stable. But we also want to recognize the ironic, the paradoxical, the ambiguous, the conflict of equal or almost equal claims. It is not fortuitous that the terms irony, paradox, ambiguity, synthesis, tension, and so many others are the staple terms of modern criticism. They are ways of saying that categories merge, break down, that elements from one category have an odd way of turning up in neighboring or distant categories.¹⁵⁶

Scientific method, then, cannot account for all that is possible, although it tries to do so by accounting for all that is predictable.

This unusual quality of the parables led scholars and others to interpret them allegorically.¹⁵⁷ Since the stories did not seem like life, perhaps they corresponded to some elaborate belief-system or world ordering foreign to normal experience.

O'Connor's stories, too, have seemed allegorical in meaning. One critic stated that

in depicting anagogical realities Flannery O'Connor made extensive use of allegory. Beneath the distortions and inversions introduced by her adaptations of the gothic and grotesque, there runs a significant strain of traditional Christian allegory.¹⁵⁸

Another found "the aura of liturgical commentary" could make the critic wrongly try to squeeze her stories "into an alien allegorical form."¹⁵⁹ As in biblical scholarship, allegorical interpretations, while once popular, have been discarded in favor of a more holistic approach.

Often these strange factors involve the element of surprise and risk.¹⁶⁰ Sometimes, they take the form of "[t]emporal misfortune" or bad luck.¹⁶¹ The surprise and risk occurs in the parable to the character, yet Chapter IV will show how this feeling transfers from the character to the auditor.

O'Connor was accustomed to creating "experience which we are not accustomed to observe every day."¹⁶² Her stories show that "the gap between the human and the transcendent is closed only through personal risk and decision."¹⁶³ We see Mrs. Turpin at that moment:

Without her psychological defenses she must confront a Jesus who is more than a reassuring echo of her self-righteousness; and becoming more and more resentful as she commands Him to justify her treatment, she finally blurts out the hysterical cry, "Who do you think you are?" At last, she has gone too far to retreat into self-deception; she has revealed things about herself and her faith that she had never realized before. Harold Pinter once wrote that at some point in his plays his characters say something that they cannot take back, something that they have been covering up by all their chatter. This happens to Mrs. Turpin more clearly than to any other of Miss O'Connor's characters.¹⁶⁴

When the character reaches the point that he recognizes the call from God for what it is, he is shocked and stunned. The call itself, with its implicit choice, involves personal risk to the character whatever his action, since refusal to answer is itself an answer. The character is forced to choose for or against God.

A main feature of this element is that it thwarts the expectation. Some element of the story does not fit in with the expected genre of the story, causing a jolt in the auditor's thought process. For example, in the parable of the Treasure in the Field or the Pearl of Great Price, one would expect that the man, newly rich, would use his new-found wealth either to build a palace or to ransom himself from thieves. Neither occurs in the parable.¹⁶⁵ This upsetting of expectation signals that something unusual is happening in the story.

O'Connor's audience never tired of telling her that she

was not producing what they expected from a genteel Georgia lady. She explains:

I am always having it pointed out to me that life in Georgia is not at all the way I picture it, that escaped criminals do not roam the woods exterminating families, nor Bible salesmen prowl about looking for girls with wooden legs.¹⁶⁶

However, she felt her obligation as a writer was to the truth and "not to the reader's taste, not to the reader's happiness, not even to the reader's morals."¹⁶⁷ Her opinion of the discernment of the reader in observing the nature of grace in fiction was somewhat dim. "Today's reader, if he believes in grace at all, sees it as something which can be separated from nature and served to him raw as Instant Uplift. This reader's favorite word is Compassion."¹⁶⁸ The freak's function, to keep the reader "from forgetting that we share in his state," may be one reason why he is so shocking.¹⁶⁹

However much O'Connor shocks her audience, she probably did not weep over destroying "a deathly incapacity for existence in depth which she considered the besetting affliction of the contemporary world."¹⁷⁰ She attacked the "smugness, optimism, and self-righteousness" of the 1950s which concealed a "shallow complacency" built upon "a fatuous belief in the omnipotence of a highly rationalized, technological society."¹⁷¹ Therefore, one should not be surprised when encountering her symbols, "big and insolent--on first impression, an outlandish

slap in the face."¹⁷² Although critics tend to bemoan

her "black humor" and her preoccupation with violence and abnormality. The paradoxical character of her work is less confusing, however, when one recalls the number of the lame, the halt, and the blind, the freaks, misfits, grotesques, and societal rejects of the New Testament.¹⁷³

Finally, another critic finds a basic affinity in the fictions of Jesus and O'Connor in that both deal with a world in which order can be found "only indirectly and intermittently, and beneath the complexities of personal and social chaos."¹⁷⁴ With such a refusal to tie up stories neatly, one cannot wonder that O'Connor constantly defended herself against attacks of morbidity.

Summary

Parables are often classified in relation to whole genres of literature. One useful classification is the comic/tragic dichotomy which explains the action of the story. Critics seem to view O'Connor as a tragicomic writer, although they cannot agree on a paradigmatic story model which would fit all her fiction.

Parables are typically constructed with great compression and economy. O'Connor knew the power of the gesture, the look, the telling remark. Like the parables, O'Connor's

stories progress in strict chronological order, without parallel or simultaneous action. In both parables and stories, when the story contains enough indication of the ending, it is simply not given. Both exhibit great care in constructing unity and balance within the stories.

Characters are usually marked by the fact that they are both representative and individual. Both Jesus and O'Connor are concerned with poverty, both literal and spiritual; their characters behave on a secular plane of existence, often indifferent or hostile to the ways of God. The presence of evil and the presence of the prophet figure occur in both.

The parables are tiny slices of ordinary life. O'Connor dealt with the accessible through the mundane details of everyday life, abhorring theory and keeping close to the naturalistic details of rural Georgia. Both Jesus and O'Connor saw something unique and unrepeatable in the little stories they produced. Both were faithful to the truth of nature, societal manners, and the reality of experience.

Finally, both Jesus and O'Connor employed improbable elements in their stories. These elements serve to shock and disorient the reader. In O'Connor, they are frequently referred to as grotesque elements. They put the reader in a position where he must choose between an outcome of the story which would involve either clearer vision, or total lack of meaning. They might make one seek an allegorical interpretation, but in scholarship on both writers, this trend is on

the wane. Surprise and risk, as well as bad luck, are often involved. Audience expectation is blocked and subverted when this element of the story appears. Chapter IV deals with how these improbable elements work on one.

NOTES FOR CHAPTER III

¹in Jones, p. 43.

²Jones, p. 141.

³in Perrin, p. 160.

⁴in Perrin, p. 150.

⁵Perrin, p. 205.

⁶in Perrin, p. 149.

⁷Michael True, "The Comic Genius of Flannery O'Connor,"
America 137 (1977), 168.

⁸OC-M, p. 167.

⁹Carter Martin, "Comedy and Humor in Flannery O'Connor's
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¹⁰OC-M, p. 167.

¹¹Orvell, p. 39.

¹²John Cunningham, "Recent Works on Flannery O'Connor,"
Southern Humanities Review 8 (1974), 385.

¹³Josephine Jacobsen, "A Catholic Quartet," Christian Scholar
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¹⁴Browning, Flannery O'Connor, p. 41.

¹⁵Martin, The True Country, pp. 213-14.

¹⁶in Perrin, p. 149.

¹⁷Martin, The True Country, p. 104.

¹⁸Detweiler, pp. 240-1.

¹⁹May, Pruning Word, pp. 69-70.

²⁰Louise Westling, "Flannery O'Connor's Mothers and Daughters," Twentieth Century Literature 24 (1979), 516.

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²³Jones, p. 44.

²⁴Tolbert, pp. 17-18.

²⁵Naomi Bliven, "Nothing But the Truth," The New Yorker, 11 September 1965, p. 220.

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²⁸Richard Poirier, "If You Know Who You Are You Can Go Anywhere," The New York Times Book Review, 30 May 1965, p. 6.

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³²Flannery O'Connor, The Complete Stories (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978), pp. 239-40.

³³Bultman, in Jones, p. 44.

³⁴Cunningham, p. 383.

³⁵Orvell, p. 128.

³⁶May, Pruning Word, p. 76.

- ³⁷Robert McCown, S. J. "Flannery O'Connor and the Reality of Sin," The Catholic World 188 (1959), 289.
- ³⁸Orvell, p. 141.
- ³⁹Feeley, Voice, p. 25.
- ⁴⁰Martin, The True Country, p. 84.
- ⁴¹Jones, pp. 73, 122.
- ⁴²Jones, p. 120.
- ⁴³Harrington, p. 45.
- ⁴⁴Harrington, p. 29.
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- ⁴⁶Patricia D. Maida, "Light and Enlightenment in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction," Studies in Short Fiction 13 (1976), 31.
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- ⁴⁸Detweiler, pp. 242-3.
- ⁴⁹Orvell, p. 63.
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- ⁵⁸Browning, Flannery O'Connor, p. 59.

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- ⁶⁰May, Pruning Word, p. 87.
- ⁶¹Martin, The True Country, p. 232.
- ⁶²May, Pruning Word, p. 114.
- ⁶³Jacobsen, p. 151.
- ⁶⁴Tolbert, p. 17.
- ⁶⁵Jones, p. 124.
- ⁶⁶Jones, p. 125.
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- ⁶⁹Donohue, p. 32.
- ⁷⁰OC-M, p. 44.
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- ⁷⁶Martin, The True Country, p. 223.
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⁹⁷OC-M, p. 117.

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¹³¹OC-M, p. 105.

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¹³³Browning, Flannery O'Connor, pp. 40-41.

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¹⁴⁶Martin, The True Country, p. 154.

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¹⁵⁸Lorch, pp. 69-70.

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Chapter IV

Meaning, Function, and Theme

Meaning: Moral Teaching

According to Jones, the parables are more than simple moral teachings which indicate proper behavior or right conduct. In Chapter II, we found that metaphor is used by one whose complex vision of life cannot be expressed by simple maxims and aphorisms. The parable conveys the essential nature of the character of its subject matter.¹

O'Connor understood the meaning of fiction to be "not abstract meaning but experienced meaning,"² and so not beginning until one has exhausted the explanations of motivation, realism, or theology.³ Her "situations of ambiguity"⁴ can be seen as sacramental, although literary criticism understands "metaphorical" to mean much the same thing.⁵ Her prophetic or metaphorical vision links "within one image the 'this here' and the 'that there,' the distortion of appearances" revealing hidden truth.⁶

Humans have a low tolerance for truth. Since our capacity for reality is limited, Jesus dispensed it in small pieces in his parables, which veil or indirectly state the truth.⁷

O'Connor also stated things indirectly, for this was the way her imagination worked. She wrote:

The Lord doesn't speak to the novelist as he did to his servant, Moses, mouth to mouth. He speaks to him as he did to those two complainers, Aaron and Aaron's sister, Mary: through dreams and visions, in fits and starts, and by all the lesser and limited ways of the imagination.⁸

In cloaking her truth in indirection, O'Connor could, paradoxically, more nearly communicate inexpressible meaning.

The function of the parable is twofold. It expresses Jesus' concept of his own situation in both natural and supernatural order and, by being a "language event," presents the hearer with the possibility of sharing that situation.⁹ One may potentially both perceive and join Jesus' reality.

O'Connor believed "moral Judgement" to be implicit in the works of the truly Christian writer.¹⁰ Her sacramental view of reality tends to endow an object with two meanings: itself and a mystery to which it points. O'Connor thought explicitly in terms of the seven sacraments of the Church, through which one could discover and accept his true place in the divine scheme of salvation.¹¹ One critic notes how her stories indicate a belief that "God has entered once and for all into this world of matter by the Incarnation. Since then, no material thing is left untouched by the divine power permeating matter."¹² This feeling for the sacredness of all matter distinguishes O'Connor's work from that of her contemporaries.

In parable study, interpretation of elements (rather than of the story as a whole) has often held sway. Robinson describes the manner in which meaning comes about in the parable:

The internal relationship or organization clearly discernable in the one set of concepts clarifies by analogy the relation only dimly sensed in the other set. The relationship of A to B is analogous to and hence clarifying for that of C to D...The proportionateness of the two sets means that they share one judgement.¹³

The parable is a kind of argument by analogy, using one kind of reality to show another kind. Only the parable of the Prodigal Son deviates from this form, having two points or conclusions.¹⁴

O'Connor pointed from the natural to the spiritual. Her problem as a writer was how to make "a man's encounter with God" which is an experience "both natural and supernatural" both understandable and believable.¹⁵ Being true to both time (the relative) and eternity (the absolute) was a problem of which she was aware.¹⁶ But critics find that she overcame the difficulties. One typically applauds: "She fuses the transcendent world with the sublunary one, achieving such a convergence of actualities that one is meaningless without the other."¹⁷ Such statements, while somewhat uncontrolled in their enthusiasm, nevertheless accurately indicate O'Connor's skill in joining mystery and manners.

With all their careful construction, do the parables have

one non-allegorical meaning which one can consider definitive or standard? Harrington warns against "the purely academic search" which ignores

the nature of the parables as an art form which can speak to persons of any era. Likewise, to try to confine their meanings to a single point is to impoverish them of the more general spiritual truths which Jesus surely intended them to convey.¹⁸

Tolbert agrees:

The attempt to limit the polyvalency of the parables by interpreting them solely within their gospel contexts often springs from a desire for definite answers. The ambiguity and chameleonlike quality of the parables can be very discomforting.¹⁹

The parables constitute an art form which continually intrigues.

Likewise, O'Connor believed a good story to be one which "can't be reduced ... only ... expanded. A story is good when you continue to see more and more in it, and when it continues to escape you. In fiction two and two are always more than four."²⁰ The good story "resists paraphrase" and "expands in the mind." It develops from a "primary enjoyment" which begins the process of discriminating analysis.²¹ Critics, too, saw the fallacy of limiting the stories to one meaning. "The reader who responds to a single level of meaning would be responding not only partially but wrongly; he would be denying her central assumptions about existence."²² Clearly, openness to the possibility

of multiplicity of interpretations is the least respect one can show O'Connor's work.

One can endlessly extend this idea of many meanings. Harrington found the parable's "human and aesthetic elements" such that "no limits on the meaning" are justified.²³ Tolbert's rule of thumb for interpretation is the preserving of the story's integrity.²⁴ Perhaps the meanings can only be bounded by the number of created intelligent beings and the number of various interpretations each could generate. However, such speculations seem hardly practical.

That this principle of multiple interpretations applies to O'Connor needs no articulation. Anyone can discern the critical divergence of opinion on what O'Connor did and how she achieved her ends.

How, then does one extract the meaning from a story? Dodd points out that the earliest form of the parables had no directly stated moral or specific application.²⁵ In fact, one scholar asserts that such moral or theological teaching was not the point of the parables.²⁶ The "great truths" in the parables arise instead "through their very human and particular details."²⁷

Knowing this condition, how does one test his own interpretation? Jones believes in conformity, not to "some preconceived notion of what a parable should be" but to the story as a whole.²⁸ Tolbert explains some of the past interpretive trends:

While the characteristics of the parabolic narratives initiate this extension of meaning, many generations of interpreters have attempted to continue (or conclude) it by reflecting upon either the message of the historical Jesus, or the complex symbol of the Coming of the Kingdom of God, or the nature of human existence in the world.²⁹

Harrington warns against reducing the parables to simple platitudes, since

no formal doctrines to be derived from the parables can quite equal the lessons they teach just through their plain human appeal. Awareness of these facts has led contemporary scholars to warn against severely historical or theological interpretations of the parables which exclude or ignore the basic human needs they contain.³⁰

Actually, Crossan's understanding of the many functions of parable is helpful.

Parable, like symbol, expresses what cannot be expressed in any other way, demands "a right instinct" for understanding, partakes of the reality it renders intelligible, and invites participation in its referent. Parable, like myth, reveals something not reducible to a clear language.³¹

The form demands complexity otherwise unknown in such a short format.

O'Connor's stories cannot be explained by "the simple, mechanical piling-up of details."³² The meaning of a story must be integral to the story itself,³³ not a prize one extracts from the Cracker Jack box of action. After the writer presents

"grace through nature" one finds a residue of "that sense of Mystery which cannot be accounted for by any human formula."³⁴ As Orvell points out, mystery is one of the key concepts in O'Connor's understanding of her art, and yet the word by its nature defies definition; describing "what is finally unknowable."³⁵ May recognizes that "the interpreter's role is clearly ancillary to the text, for the language of the text has priority over the thought of the interpreter."³⁶ The reader must be guided by the nature of the core of meaning in her stories,³⁷ to find the meaning which accepts "that genuine ambiguity which is the touchstone of greatness."³⁸ Reader and text must cooperate in forming the meaning afresh each time the stories are read.

Jüngel argued that the parables themselves embody the Kingdom of God in language.³⁹ Through identification with the character, one has the opportunity to enter into the parable.⁴⁰ One's concerns and sensitivities help form a personal, highly subjective interpretation.⁴¹ The parables act in such a way that the active and passive roles switch. For instance, in the parable of the Pearl of Great Price, the pearl influences the man so that he, in selling all he has, becomes a passive element. In quoting TeSelle's Speaking in Parables, Tolbert notes how the parables dislocate the reader so that

if the parable "works," the spectators become participants, not because they want to necessarily or simply have "gotten the point" but because they have, for the moment, "lost control" or as the new hermeneuts say, "been interpreted."⁴²

Perrin notes: "This interpretation makes the parable very much a paradigm of the activity of God and the response of man, a paradigm of the relationship between God and man."⁴³ Interestingly, both the character and the reader are simultaneously affected, as that both experience the switch at the same moment.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, one identifies with the man in the ditch. While listening to the story, one forms opinions of the priest, Levite, and Samaritan; these opinions equal the story's ending, meaning, and interpretation.⁴⁴ The parables, then, are a call to action through judgement. Notes Tolbert:

Many scholars have recognized that the parables demand from their perceivers a response to the world view manifest in them. What these scholars failed to see however was that the parables oblige their hearers not only to respond to the world view of the story but actually to participate in creating that world view.⁴⁵

Each person is called in these parables "to decide what he will do with his life when confronted with the Gospel and with Jesus himself."⁴⁶ Parables prepare one for this important confrontation.

In O'Connor occurs a similar moment, one that "illuminates a relationship, resolves a conflict, or induces a self-recognition."⁴⁷ Sometimes, foreshadowing gives the reader "a sense

of having participated in the creative act; his response to the artifact gives a certain life to it."⁴⁸ We experience the desires of the characters, as in "Good Country People."

"Hulga's dream is, finally, a dream of human wholeness and for a few moments the reader is inclined to share her vision."⁴⁹

However, the ending changes this momentary pity. "With the comic distance removed by our renewed sympathy for the abandoned Hulga, the reader is sentenced to an ambiguous straddling of the comic and the cruel which he is forced to recognize as innate in himself."⁵⁰ A closer examination of the power of the story over the audience to captivate and force to respond to its message on this deep level would be useful.

Process: The Call

Dodd pointed out that the vagueness and strangeness of parables draw the hearer on to interpret the story while he hears it.⁵¹ The strangeness creates an atmosphere wherein the auditor is encouraged to follow the form as far as possible.

For an age with neither "a very sharp eye for the almost imperceptible intrusions of grace" nor "much feeling for the nature of violences which precede and follow them"⁵² O'Connor could "present truth only in a distorted form." This method served to "puzzle those who confuse what is true with what is right."⁵³ One critic found her without sympathy for her characters to counterbalance her "searing moral vision."

This lack kept her from producing "the tension, the two-way emotional pull, that makes for important religious fiction."⁵⁴ Nevertheless, the majority of readers, if critics are a representative group, feel the strange, compelling quality of her stories, as in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," where Christ is represented as a hermaphroditic freak in a side show.⁵⁵ Such strange details compel one to enter into the story. (For further explication of what draws one in, see Chapter III, Improbable Elements.)

The purpose of drawing the hearer into the parable, as Funk noted, is to tease one into thought. When this happens, the reader's conclusion provides an ending for the parable, which becomes at the same time metaphor, metaphor extended into narrative, and realistic narrative.⁵⁶ Fuchs describes this moment of revelation when the spoken parable ceases to be story and transforms into a call:

But the similitude is no longer a pious address, nor is it a toying with irony; it has the effect of a sudden flash of lightning that illuminates the night. It is now irresistible and self-sufficient. It has become a text, a preaching text. It gives to these people a context for which they could not hope, nor even reckon with. This is why it has indeed something miraculous about it.⁵⁷

The parable calls one to action, usually a moral judgement upon the story.

O'Connor, too, transformed her readers with her fiction. "No one ever wrote narrative with more secret

cunning, coming up with the minute differences that excite us into reading and cause us to respond."⁵⁸ May finds the power of her language such that "the word is both structure and meaning."⁵⁹ Her grotesquerie is never "an end in itself," but a means of shocking one into thought.⁶⁰ In "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," the moment of judgement comes when "a cricus hermaphrodite utters the word that transforms a hateful child into a maturing adolescent."⁶¹ "Revelation" also operates in typical hermeneutical fashion. By Ruby's reaction we know that "the improbable prophet Mary Grace has spoken the saving word of grace" to her.⁶² Reversal and irony operate the moral law.⁶³

The parables make the hearer understand the possibility of achieving either salvation or damnation by his own hand. "A parable dramatizes an ontological possibility" which Harrington describes as "the gain or loss of existence, the becoming authentic or inauthentic."⁶⁴ Traditional pious language cannot express this moment. In speaking of the son's decision to return home in the parable of the Prodigal Son, Harrington explains that the

laconic character of the statement, "he came to himself," should be retained. It is not a matter of repentance or conversion - terms too lofty to describe his disposition at this stage. Rather, it is a matter of surprise, a new dimension coming from beyond himself.⁶⁵

Thus the character, and by identification, the listener, realizes his own past inadequacy.

In the same way, O'Connor's stories operate on the reader, forcing some self-judgement. One critic describes the effect as

quite surprising and quite against our will [as] O'Connor manages to convert us.... The conversion may be short-lived, but it is none the less real; for the more we read of O'Connor, the more we see the startling similarities between ourselves and her grotesque atheists and hypocrites. We must believe in God simply in self-defense; for to reject God, once we have been drawn into O'Connor's world, is to reveal the same kind of perversity that strikes us as so ludicrous in her characters.⁶⁶

Another critic notes: "One is hard pressed not to consider the possibility of that fiction's truth in immediate relation to himself."⁶⁷ Even those who profess nothing must somehow respond. Orvell feels

we may find a certain effective dissonance in our response - which may be the result of the tension in O'Connor's own viewpoint between the austere Christian and the failing human. What else allows her to treat death at once tragically and comically?⁶⁸

This unexpected nature of "the moment of divine illumination" shows "the unique power of Divine intervention."⁶⁹ The meaning of the story, then, hinges on "the action which is both judgement within the story and revelation to the

reader."⁷⁰ The interpreter must then allow the text to speak to the reader, which is its vocation as language; this facilitates the reader being interpreted by the text. Thus, understanding is shared and unity begun.⁷¹

Process: The Reply

The text, then, speaks to the reader while calling the character to self-judgement. One is forced to reply to the situation. In catching the imagination, the parable urges a judgement, which then applies to the thing being compared (Kingdom of God, Son of Man, etc.).⁷² Then, "caught up in the dilemma of the metaphor" the reader can either "choose to unfold with the story, be illuminated by the metaphor, or reject the call and abide with the conventional."⁷³ Funk further explicates the reader's position as he experiences the story. The parables are

language events in which the hearer has to choose between world. If he elects the parabolic world, he is invited to dispose himself to concrete reality as it is ordered in the parable, and venture, without benefit of landmark but on the parable's authority, into the future.⁷⁴

By their very nature, the parables are a call to action. They present a paradox within the metaphor which compels the listener to choose. They "require, even compel, interpretation," deriving their meaning "from the fusion of the parabolic

narrative and the belief system of the interpreter."⁷⁵ Harrington notes that they serve "to uproot a man from indolence and lead him to vigilance."⁷⁶ Presented with a decision, one cannot defer.

Critics and readers of O'Connor's fiction feel the need to relate to the work on a more than simply receptive, passive level. O'Connor found "implicit in the Christian view of the world" the idea that "reality is something to which we must be returned at considerable cost."⁷⁷ She found the "intellectual and moral judgements" of her fiction to "have the ascendancy over feeling."⁷⁸ Although the reader views the story from an objective position of greater freedom than that of the characters, he responds to "the total spectrum of the human condition" which includes his own position.⁷⁹ O'Connor causes her unsympathetic characters to experience a reversal, the resulting shock showing the reader the paradoxical pull of emotion and reason on the one hand, and faith's clear vision of good and evil in the other.⁸⁰ The shock of evil is the means by which

an assault is made upon the psyche of the protagonist (and hence upon that of the reader), the intent being to tear away the protecting layers of moralism and rationalization, revealing thereby the spiritual malaise and corruption which infests the unconscious.⁸¹

O'Connor in this way forces "contemporary criticism to witness a seemingly anachronistic wedding of art and belief."⁸²

Through the Joycean device of the epiphany, she led the reader "to a dazzling revelation in a moment of time or away from that moment on the waves of its resonance."⁸³ These moments occur through either vivid imagery or "an actual manifestation of the divine"⁸⁴ and force one to encounter "the 'green world,' through which she beleives there glimmers a larger reality made available through grace."⁸⁵

The stories couch the judgement of protagonists in "the eschatological language of apocalypse or revelation."⁸⁶ One critic describes the moment of truth as being that point at which the characters

are at the synapse between that they are (unknown to themselves) and what they do. And these synapses, these flashes of connection, are ... "complete," immediate, right, irreversible ... physically, the way different parts of a body fit together.⁸⁷

Even if just for the briefest moment, the character is confronted with "the wholly other who becomes, through the mysterious potential of love, the way to himself. In that instant of decision he creates his freedom or his bondage."⁸⁸ O'Connor forces her characters out "to meet evil and grace" and to "act on a trust beyond themselves."⁸⁹ Their choice is not "between vague religious belief and solid secular values based on reason, but...between all-consuming evangelical commitment to God and a nothingness--the complete repudiation of any values at all."⁹⁰ Another critic finds O'Connor interested in

what happens to the character at this juncture, when he is suddenly thrown outside his personal and cultural resources into a premonition of the infinite and indefinite which is not only beyond all previous calculations, but beyond all calculations he might make.⁹¹

Although the character cannot see the grace which lies before him, the reader can usually anticipate such moments. Notes one critic, "the opportunities for grace and the epiphanies in her stories are usually plain, direct, and clearly identifiable."⁹² Grace brings a specific realization to the characters; it

brings the characters to a sudden or violent recognition that they and their sick loves are not what they had supposed; and the objects of their perverse affections are taken from them (Hulga's wooden leg...) to make room for a worthier object. They are brought to the point of truth so that they may see the Truth if they care to, so that the Holy Ghost may come to them.⁹³

Shiftlet experiences such a moment when confronted about the truth of his mother from the cynical young hitchhiker.⁹⁴ Runy Turpin "is reduced from her confidence in her own merited salvation to the terrors of that mercy which is incommensurate to her worth" as Mary Grace reveals the word of God which influences Ruby throughout the day.⁹⁵ Hulga, sans glasses and leg. is stripped of her autonomy so that she might confront and accept both her physical deformity and "the ironies inherent in man's spiritual-corporeal nature."⁹⁶ O'Connor

manages such a situation by means of a "paradoxical double vision, simultaneously keeping in focus the iniversal implications of a particular present as well as the potential particularization of the universal and eternal."⁹⁷ O'Connor's parabolic fiction insists on "hiddenness, ironic distance, and personal decision in the experience of coming to belief."⁹⁸ Her language simultaneously elicits a response and gives the power to respond.⁹⁹

The real power of the parable is in its ability to show the auditor himself and his world through the parable.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, such is the nature of the language-event that it is not complete until one expresses his reaction to it. However the response orders the parable suggests one's eschatological choice.¹⁰¹ Jeremias calls the parables "above all weapons of warfare, of controversy, vindication, and attack and directed to definite situations."¹⁰² So the parable judges the hearer, indicates his eschatological choice, and provides an attack on the status quo.

In their various and divergent remarks, critics of O'Connor's works often reveal more about themselves than about the work. O'Connor threw down this interpretive gauntlet when she wrote that art, far from being democratic, is "only for those who are willing to undergo the effort needed to understand it."¹⁰³ May notes that since the word is an event, it needs the participation of the reader to complete its meaning.¹⁰⁴ The reaction is necessary because of the

story's intrinsic nature as story. This comment raises a whole area of parabolic/literary comparison which has been ignored or overlooked by literary critics. The fiction's power lies in "the power of language to interpret its listener rather than through its need to be interpreted through him."¹⁰⁵ This illumination can occur only if the person's defenses are struck down in order for the "collision with truth" to result in "a metaphysical experience."¹⁰⁶ Another critic observes that

the real impact of that revelation is never reserved for the character to whom a narrative revelation comes, but rather for us who perceive the revelatory pattern within the narrative.¹⁰⁷

The reader, in his perceived superiority to the characters, meets their strength and integrity and, in the "midst of laughter, we come to realize that we, not they, are the real comic figures."¹⁰⁸

This comment raises the issue of reaction to O'Connor, and the resulting scholarship problem which perhaps partly accounts for the great flood of articles on this corpus. May explains:

Lackey notes, for example, four generic types of subjective response to Flannery O'Connor--the misinterpreters, the muddled faultfinders, the open adversaries, and the over-enthusiastic supporters. O'Connor actually provides an excellent study in the almost limitless possibilities of subjective interpretation precisely because of the controversial religious element in her stories.¹⁰⁹

Another critic describes the type of reader apt to misinterpret:

To the literary dilettante, to the morally neutral reader, and to those who are squeamish or sentimental, Flannery O'Connor's fiction will generate a startling range of misconceptions and preposterous analytical abuses.¹¹⁰

But the reader "with a sound background in modern literature and an orthodox understanding of Christocentric religion," will see her stories in their proper light as "a unique and forceful body of fiction based on the profound and yet simple verities that have been the focal point of Western thought for almost two thousand years."¹¹¹ Therefore respect for the work's integrity, which extends beyond examination of theological, philosophical, social, and psychological data, is needed.¹¹²

Some critical works, alas, fail to avoid these pitfalls. Their authors end up with literary egg on their faces. For example, one critic calls for the sentimental position O'Connor abhorred when he complained, "O'Connor insists upon the importance of avoiding hell but makes no attempt to depict the alternative forms of the afterlife."¹¹³ Another admits to being compelled to question if one's true identification might not be with the passively hypocritical Mrs. Freeman in "Good Country People."¹¹⁴ Another calls her stories "serious, slow-moving jokes, and they are always 'on' someone. Usually the joke is harsh, and the revelation it brings overwhelming."¹¹⁵ One goes so far as to accuse O'Connor of misanthropy:

Hers is a vision of a world without love;
 a world marred by eruptions of violence,
 physical and moral; and a world of all-
 but-total alienation of human beings from
 each other. Selfishness stalks the pages
 ...like a starving beast - 116

As May notes, "in addition to the aesthetic problem raised by the currently disturbing religious vision that O'Connor dramatizes, she has forced the question of the very validity of our interpretations of her stories."¹¹⁷ Not only the characters are left shattered on the ruins of their value systems, searching for a place to stand.

But the critic is not the only one who must suffer the violence of God's love.

The O'Connor character is an anguished human being, trying to control the circle of his existence. He passes through a moment of revelation caused by the intrusion into his plotted world of the non-probable and the uncontrollable, and he either gains a new insight into reality or is destroyed by the truth which he has realized but cannot bear.¹¹⁸

For example, Shiftlet changes from "potential redemptive agent" to a "satanic figure, confirmed in his belief in total depravity."¹¹⁹ Shiftlet, in his rejection of Lycynell, is "a fool turning down a gift of ultimate worth for junk, for nothing; and at the same time we see that Shiftlet is not much more of a fool than other men who turn from God to materialism."¹²⁰ Shiftlet, finally,

will "save his life" by refusing to die into the mystery of existence, but the self he saves is a false and sterile parody of the redeemed creature, endlessly questing for pure transcendence, endlessly unable to die.¹²¹

However, not all characters choose wrongly. The child in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" realizes that her attitude to others is wrong, that all share in the Body of Christ.¹²² "In the likeness of the hermaphrodite, the child comes-- as each of us must--to realize what her limitations are but, more importantly, what she can accomplish despite them."¹²³ Hulga, corrected in her vision of nothingness, is poised on the edge of self-acceptance;¹²⁴ Ruby Turpin discovers that the first and last shall change places.¹²⁵ All these characters respond to the call; most accept the challenge of life.

After analyzing the stories, one must return to a "post-critical, or 'second' naiveté. There is a sense in which after we have learned all that we can about a text with the aid of our critical tools we have to allow that text to address us once more as a text."¹²⁶ It is not enough to tear the text apart; one must reconstruct it before leaving.

In the same way, O'Connor's stories must be enjoyed again after they have been analyzed. O'Connor noted the primacy of enjoyment when she related the following anecdote of an encounter she had with one reader:

Last fall I received a letter from a student who said she would be "graciously appreciative" if I would tell her

"just what enlightenment" I expected her to get from each of my stories. I suspect she had a paper to write. I wrote her back to forget about the enlightenment and just try to enjoy them. I knew that was the most unsatisfactory answer I could have given because, of course, she didn't want to enjoy them, she just wanted to figure them out.¹²⁷

Enjoyment, as one of the levels of meaning, must be integrated with the other levels whose distinction exists "only for the convenience of critical description."¹²⁸ This part of critical analysis is surely the easiest to achieve.

Major Themes

As in all fiction, Jesus' parables contain a few obsessive themes around which the stories tend to revolve. Harrington notes that Jesus discussed various aspects of the Kingdom.¹²⁹ One of these aspects is that the Kingdom is always eminent, that is, always within our reach and within our hearts.

Many critics have noted the religious bent of O'Connor's stories. Her noncyclical concept of time, very close to the Hebrew understanding, involves a "moment-by-moment progression toward a designated end, the Parousia."¹³⁰ One critic notes that interest in O'Connor has concentrated mostly on her thematic concerns.¹³¹ In spite of limited range and subjects, O'Connor shows how "the essential unity

of existence requires a wholeness of intellectual or artistic vision."¹³² In discussing Southern writers, she gave an indication of the themes to which she felt her region leant itself: "a distrust of the abstract, a sense of human dependence on the grace of God, and a knowledge that evil is not simply a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be endured."¹³³ Her stories are parabolic in their endless non-repetative variations on the theme of sin and grace.¹³⁴ Another writer applauds her intense selectivity:

In one sense, Miss O'Connor's repetitiousness is an indication of how serious a writer she is. As against what might be called writers of occupation (who can of course always "pick" their subjects) she was obsessed by arrangements of life and language in which she saw some almost eschatological possibilities.¹³⁵

Thus, these "rural miniature" pictures of "the primary intuitions of man" have the quality of "tales told in a war tent, with tomorrow bringing mutilation and death, but this day's tale of life made sweeter by the expectation."¹³⁶ Her sense of the meaning of grace as "an ideal of reconciled and harmonious impulses" whose acceptance is "a centered act of the personality" which balances "possibility and necessity, independence and dependence"¹³⁷ includes the consideration that redeemed man, while not complete, would be closer to his final fulfillment.¹³⁸ To O'Connor, the need to believe in Christ is as basic as the hunger and sex drives

to the human personality.¹³⁹ As such, her stories' situations "become a paradigm of the human awareness and assumption of individual guilt and the struggle to find grace" by encountering that guilt.¹⁴⁰

O'Connor's concern with grace was, she felt, as basic to her audience as to her characters. She wrote: "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."¹⁴¹ Her themes center on "the integration of the self, the need for community, and the violence of prophecy."¹⁴² Although never intruding on the artistic unity of her works, O'Connor's thematic concerns are nevertheless very evident.¹⁴³ They include

the already-mentioned violence; a sense of the violation and outrage as omnipresent as it is in Faulkner; moral and ethical confusion resulting from a superficial understanding of the nature of good and evil; the ontological privation of man cut off from the course of his being; his self-deceptive belief in his "innocence" or the efficacy of works to bring about salvation; and the action of God's grace through creatures with demonic traits.¹⁴⁴

Critics agree on O'Connor's themes, but their descriptive means give the impression of divergence.

The parables of Jesus are concerned with love in its various aspects, specifically the love of God for His children.¹⁴⁵ One of these aspects is that the price of

redemption is never too great.¹⁴⁶ Jesus always defended "the outcasts of society" in his parables.¹⁴⁷ This aspect of God's love emphasizes the many who are called; all may join in the celebration of community.

Similarly, O'Connor presented "a view of man and of his existence which does contain, although often hidden under symbol, the true joy of life."¹⁴⁸ Her stories are a "celebration of being, the proper justification of art as a sacramental devotion of one's gift."¹⁴⁹ But the God who lives with those who reject Him rather than with those who pretend to rely on Him is something of a shock to encounter:

In her stories, however joyful the sweet music of salvation, the prophet's news that God is not dead, after all, strikes man's untrained ears with the harshness of a sonic boom.¹⁵⁰

But O'Connor, unlike most contemporary writers, expresses "the positive responsibilities and the quality of dignity of which man is capable"¹⁵¹ as in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," which May calls "one of O'Connor's most positive and reassuring pictures of human potentiality."¹⁵² "Good Country People," in dealing with the harm that sin does to the whole community, shows how sin and redemption are complimentary themes.¹⁵³ "Revelation" deals with the possibilities to which redemption calls us. But this call can pose a threat to the established order. A critic explains:

The central metaphor works both ways. On the one hand, it insists that freaks possess souls sacred to God; on the other, it implies that the mystery of the three-in-one is viewed by a corrupt world as spiritual hermaphroditism. Christ's message to the world finally emerges as something "inspected" by "preachers" and "shut down."¹⁵⁴

Whatever the interpretation, one cannot argue that O'Connor's fictional world deals with things of ultimate importance. She shows

that death, the convergence of time and eternity, places the individual's life in the perspective of history - personal, social, and biblical. Concomitant with this idea is one which it includes: that life derives its meaning from the context of history.¹⁵⁵

With such heady thematic material, one can easily see how O'Connor's fiction might be difficult medicine for readers to take.

The obverse of this theme of total acceptance by God is that of the risk involved in being divinely loved. The unspoken danger of God's generosity is that, when the outpouring of mercy is greater, so, too, the judgement for rejection is harsher.¹⁵⁶ Such is the paradox of the felix culpa: the greater the sin, the greater the redemption, the greater too the punishment for those who reject grace.

O'Connor saw this danger in her portrayal of "the relentless God embracing and crushing the mean, the weak, the petty."¹⁵⁷ "To harden the heart against salvation's call

is to risk Nonbeing--absence of being, separation, alienation from the being of the world and consequently from the Source of the world's being."¹⁵⁸ As with Jesus, O'Connor was not interested in placating the Pharisees.¹⁵⁹ Thus, the concepts of "irresistible and invitational grace" are "ultimately only two sides of the same coin of the gospel, which is both threat and promise."¹⁶⁰ As O'Connor expressed the difficulty and terror she felt in the process of writing, so do the results torment, as one critic explains:

Her stories cause terror or fear; they are dreadful; they elicit awe; they are extreme in degree; they are intense, severe, excessive. Only art could make such fiction beautiful; only reality could sustain such intense art. Only an artist penetrated with Christianity could use such extreme means to evoke from reality its full measure of splendor.¹⁶¹

Thus, O'Connor portrays Christ as "a diligent snatcher back of His own."¹⁶² In this understanding, she certainly followed the passage she marked in her copy of Tresmontant's A Study of Hebrew Thought, which Feeley quotes: "Fire is an ambiguous power, both kind and awful. So too the love of God, the delight of the already purified saint, is a torment to any man who experiences it without communing with it."¹⁶³ Thus, God offers both a blessing and a curse in calling His people to salvation, a thorny paradox O'Connor reflected in her writings.

Summary

The moral teaching of the parables is more than simply a pithy saying; it is contained in the story as a totality. O'Connor's stories, like the metaphor, compare something known with something unknown, but never at the expense of veracity. As in the parables, O'Connor dispenses little bits of truth. The parable both expresses Jesus' concept of order and invites the hearer to participate in that understanding. O'Connor shared a similar vision of the inseparability of the natural and the supernatural worlds. As a parable is a comparative argument, so O'Connor uses the physical to express spiritual truth by analogy. Rather than looking for one standard meaning to a parable, the scholar must search for its general spiritual lessons. O'Connor believes a good story must, finally, escape the reader's total grasp. Parables might have infinite meanings; the stories certainly seem to have as many interpretations as there are critics. One must find meaning through the details of the parable, searching both within himself and in the parable as holistic art form. O'Connor's work, because of her dedication to the concept of "mystery," cannot be encompassed by the rational mind, nor was it designed for that purpose. As the kingdom of God emerges through the parables by switching the active and passive roles so that the listener

becomes the one influenced, so too do O'Connor's stories confront the reader with a moment of decision.

This moment occurs by the power of the parable to draw one in. This power derives from the strangeness and shock provided by the improbable elements described in Chapter III. O'Connor draws readers into her stories. Once inside the parable, the hearer is teased into providing its ending; similarly, O'Connor's stories seem to create a situation in which one cannot help but respond. This response indicates some truth about salvation or damnation; the stories force self-judgement.

In judging the story, one compares his judgement of the internal situation with the less-known element of the analogy. Thus, a judgement made on the temporal situation irresistibly applies to an eternal one. O'Connor forces the reader, even the non-believer, to make a similar comparison, thus generating his own response to an eternity in which he may not even believe. So, both parable and story have the end result of offering one a perception of himself and his world in the light of eternal verities. This effect occurs, not through fancy tricks, but because word, by its very nature and vocation, must interpret the reader (rather than needing to be interpreted). But this leveling can only occur if one's defenses are abolished. The danger is that, in an angry backlash, critics (or clerics) will misinterpret the text. Many O'Connor critics do not avoid this danger, making

wild statements about O'Connor's intent which indicate their anger or bewilderment more than the meaning of the stories. When faced with the eternal choice, all characters necessarily react differently, although most of them choose life. For those who do not, one may hope, since the call to authenticity will surely come again.

After peeling apart the stories, one must reassemble them so that they may speak their word a second time. This process is both simple and enjoyable, especially in O'Connor, because of the highly comic mode of her fiction.

One of the major themes of the parables is the imminent nature of the kingdom of God: always near, always waiting to begin. O'Connor saw the possibility for redemption in every moment, especially very ordinary ones. O'Connor saw a need to believe in Christ as fundamental to her characters, her readers, and herself. Readers demand the possibility for grace in a story, even if they are unaware of their expectations. As Jesus' work affirms the basic joy of creation, O'Connor's stories show the basic dignity and possibility for greatness inherent in humans. With this joy, however, comes the risk of greater damnation since condemnation is directly proportional to the amount of mercy shown. O'Connor knew and understood this danger of God's redemptive power, incorporating it into her works.

NOTES FOR CHAPTER IV

- ¹Jones, p. 85.
- ²OC-M, 96.
- ³OC-M, p. 153.
- ⁴Detweiler, p. 236.
- ⁵Wynne, p. 34.
- ⁶TeSalle, p. 164.
- ⁷Harrington, p. 7.
- ⁸OC-M, p. 181.
- ⁹Perrin, p. 111.
- ¹⁰OC-M, p. 30.
- ¹¹Martin, The True Country, pp. 14-15.
- ¹²Sister Jeremy, C.S.J., "The Comic Ritual of Flannery O'Connor," Catholic Library World 39 (1967), 199.
- ¹³in Perrin, p. 122.
- ¹⁴Jones, p. 121.
- ¹⁵OC-M, p. 161.
- ¹⁶OC-M, p. 177.
- ¹⁷Martin, The True Country, p. 9.
- ¹⁸Harrington, pp. 10-11.
- ¹⁹Tolbert, p. 62.
- ²⁰OC-M, p. 102.
- ²¹OC-M, p. 108.
- ²²Eggenschweiler, p. 13.
- ²³Harrington, p. 11.

²⁴Tolbert, p. 71.

²⁵Dodd, p. 117.

²⁶Findlay, in Jones, p. 31.

²⁷Harrington, p. 13.

²⁸Jones, p. 108.

²⁹Tolbert, p. 18.

³⁰Harrington, p. 12.

³¹in Perrin, p. 157.

³²OC-M, p. 93.

³³OC-M, p. 96.

³⁴OC-M, p. 153.

³⁵Orvell, p. 18.

³⁶May, Pruning Word, p. 4.

³⁷May, Pruning Word, p. 18.

³⁸May, Pruning Word, p. xix.

³⁹Perrin, p. 117.

⁴⁰Perrin, p. 118.

⁴¹Tolbert, p. 69.

⁴²Tolbert, p. 42.

⁴³Perrin, pp. 118-19.

⁴⁴Funk, in Perrin, p. 140.

⁴⁵Tolbert, pp. 67-8.

⁴⁶Harrington, p. 15.

⁴⁷Orvell, p. 128.

⁴⁸Marion Montgomery, "Flannery O'Connor and the Jansenist Problem in Fiction." The Southern Review 14 (N.S.) (1978), 444.

- ⁴⁹Browning, Flannery O'Connor, p. 49, emphasis mine.
- ⁵⁰Wynne, p. 44.
- ⁵¹Dodd, p. 5.
- ⁵²OC-M, p. 112.
- ⁵³Feeley, Voice, p. 31.
- ⁵⁴Louis D. Rubin, Jr., The Curious Death of the Novel (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1967), p. 266.
- ⁵⁵Jeremy, p. 199.
- ⁵⁶in Perrin, p. 134.
- ⁵⁷in Perrin, p. 55.
- ⁵⁸Kazin, p. 22.
- ⁵⁹May, "Flannery O'Connor and the New Hermeneutic," p. 43.
- ⁶⁰Feeley, Voice, p. 8.
- ⁶¹May, Pruning Word, p. 74.
- ⁶²May, "Flannery O'Connor and the New Hermeneutic," p. 41.
- ⁶³Mooney, p. 136.
- ⁶⁴Harrington, p. 21.
- ⁶⁵Harrington, p. 128.
- ⁶⁶Edelstein, p. 140.
- ⁶⁷Marion Montgomery, "In Defense of Flannery O'Connor's Design," Georgia Review 25 (1971), 315.
- ⁶⁸Orvell, p. 174.
- ⁶⁹Maida, p. 34.
- ⁷⁰May, "Flannery O'Connor and the New Hermeneutic," p. 32.
- ⁷¹May, Pruning Word, p. 4.

⁷²Dodd, p. 11.

⁷³Funk, in Perrin, p. 138.

⁷⁴in Perrin, p. 138.

⁷⁵Toblert, p. 40.

⁷⁶Harrington, p. 120.

⁷⁷OC-M, p. 112.

⁷⁸OC-M, p. 43.

⁷⁹Wynne, p. 43.

⁸⁰Martin, The True Country, pp. 225-6.

⁸¹Preston M. Browning, Jr., "Flannery O'Connor and the Demonic," Modern Fiction Studies 19 (1973), 35.

⁸²May, Pruning Word, p. xiii.

⁸³Coffey, p. 94.

⁸⁴Sister M. Kathleen Feeley, S.S.N.D., "Thematic Imagery in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor," Southern Humanities Review 3 (1969), 17.

⁸⁵Marion Montgomery, "Flannery O'Connor's Transformation of the Sentimental," Mississippi Quarterly 25 (1971-72), 12.

⁸⁶May, "Pruning Word," p. 335.

⁸⁷Kazin, pp. 1, 22.

⁸⁸Detweiler, p. 243.

⁸⁹OC-M, p. 42.

⁹⁰Martin, The True Country, p. 64.

⁹¹Walter Shear, "Flannery O'Connor," Renascence 20 (1968), 141.

⁹²Martin, The True Country, p. 86.

- 93Cunningham, p. 382.
- 94May, Pruning Word, p. 70.
- 95Montgomery, "Flannery O'Connor's Transformation of the Sentimental," p. 13.
- 96Eggenschweiler, p. 57.
- 97TeSelle, p. 164.
- 98TeSelle, p. 165.
- 99May, Pruning Word, p. 3.
- 100Harrington, p. 18.
- 101Perrin, p. 139.
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Chapter V

The Writers and Their Work

Apart from specifics about the stories, are there any general points on Jesus and O'Connor as artists which one might gather from critical remarks? If so, can some of these point to general characteristics of the fiction, or perhaps to artistic intent? Although the most tenuous area of the argument, this discussion promises interesting insights.

Literary Virtues

One of the strongest points of the parable is its extreme compression. Its power "derives from its economy of words, its finesse, and its lack of allegory and idealization."¹ Jesus could fit more story into a few dozen words than most creators can put in a whole life's work.

O'Connor's style was also highly compressed. Through her "superb craftsmanship and descriptive abilities" she "made a thousand pictures of a dozen words"² achieving her desired effects with great "suddenness and economy, and with a characteristically stunning conclusion"³ which serves to highlight this economy. Her fiction operates in "a completely realized moral and

emotional universe" in which O'Connor's work could be immediately recognized; one finds that

her fiction is unmistakably its author's own. It's marked by her austere, elliptical style and almost conversational tone; by the passion she makes felt, as art must, only in and through the story elements; by the downward tug of doom that haunts her characters and their actions.⁴

In her economy, O'Connor does not forget the all-encompassing world picture her characters need. They exist in a real world, not in an allegorical fantasy.

Another characteristic of the parables is their uniqueness. Harrington notes that Jesus "took the standard meaning and created something entirely original, unique among rabbinical parables or the era in their sheer creative brilliance and living quality."⁵ The parable of the Prodigal Son "stands alone among the parables in its artistic perfection."⁶ Jones reminds the reader that the parables are more than teaching devices.

For it should not be forgotten that Jesus was not only a religious teacher but a creative artist of unusual skill and penetration, the author of some of the world's classics in short stories and fables, and one whose distinction in this field was as unique as the rest of his mission.⁷

The characters' lack of need for names attests to Jesus' skill as a creator of stories. The short descriptive names for the parables alone have the power to evoke the whole story in one crystalline thought.

O'Connor's unique stories are memorable for their veracity and artistic skill. For O'Connor, a story "always involves, in a dramatic way, the mystery of personality."⁸ Knowing there is nothing new to say, she set out on a path of unique expression.⁹ The model of parable "as a structural aesthetic principle that varies from narrative to narrative" allows every O'Connor story "to mediate its own specific insight into the mystery of existence."¹⁰ The main link among these stories is a deep concern for truth, as Hulga's comment to her mother indicates:

"If you want me, here I am - LIKE I AM."
In this wry statement one hears a single echo of the leitmotif which dominated Flannery O'Connor's life and which her imagination transformed in various ways in her fiction: truth - or absolute self-integrity and an unflinching view of reality....An honest expression of thought is a sign of one's adherence to truth.¹¹

As in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," O'Connor managed to distill "complexities into the nasal syllables, 'I don't dispute hit.'"¹² She balances skepticism with compassion, eternal concerns with "delight in human gestures and stylistic exuberance controlled by sureness of structure"¹³ to form literature which, in sheer singularity, would be difficult to surpass.

Jesus possessed another important literary quality, perhaps the most important one for an artist: objectivity and absolute adherence to a perception of truth.

Though he gave his words an unexpected, singular twist yet, in keeping with his whole mission, Jesus sought out the very humblest

of everyday things and gave them immortality
 - a patch on an old garment, a knock on the
 door at midnight, little children piping.¹⁴

Eschewing false pity, Jesus respected his characters enough to allow them to fail.

O'Connor's dedication to truth in the relative, in the absolute, and in art, is evident in her remarks on the duty of the artist.¹⁵ He "is required to open his eyes on the world around him and look. If what he sees is not highly edifying, he is still required to look. Then he is required to reproduce, with words, what he sees."¹⁶ This stern vision is seen again in one of O'Connor's artistic statements: "St. Thomas called art 'reason in making.' This is a very cold and very beautiful definition, and if it is unpopular today, this is because reason has lost ground among us."¹⁷ O'Connor's "impassivity in the face of the extraordinary"¹⁸ seems part of the "incredible distance" she maintained from her work.¹⁹ "Reading her, one is aware above all of a gift blessedly made objective, a giftedness reading the world."²⁰ One critic, apologizing for his lengthy analysis, stated: "All of this sounds as if Miss O'Connor were a theologian constructing parables. Far from it. Miss O'Connor knew the difference between art and religion, and never confused the two."²¹ Despite an obvious confusion on the qualities of a parable, this critic accurately confirmed O'Connor's lack of didacticism. A deeply religious vision of life led her to such truth. "Because she envisioned life from its biblical beginnings to its eschatological end, she could smile at what man has made of himself and

give him, in her fiction, a glimpse of a new possibility."²²

Such ultimate comedy arises not from hope but from strict observation with both the physical eye and the eye of faith.

The effect of this kind of concentrated truth is a fiction which is highly sacramental. The "aesthetic form presses the two - the ontological and the ontic - into a unity; they are integrated in one configuration of action and interpretation."²³ Jesus creates in his parables what cannot, outside of his own person, exist in the fallen world: a perfectly harmonious union of the temporal and eternal.

O'Connor strove for the same kind of fiction. She understood her stories to make an impression on the reader which is not always conscious, as in her description of the identification of Hulga's leg with her paralyzed heart: "The reader makes this connection from things he is shown. He may not even know that he makes this connection, but the connection is there nevertheless and it has its effect on him."²⁴ Her language is literally sacramental since the word is the means whereby idea, through faith, becomes reality. "Words like blood, bread, water become charged with dynamic meaning that shakes the reader's self-awareness and compels him to consider the potential of grace."²⁵ As Jesus incarnates the Word, so O'Connor's stories trace the workings of grace through episodes in the lives of the characters. In "the shock of disparate language and image" O'Connor's fiction is "akin to the paradox and scandal of Christ."²⁶ Her characters always have the ontological problem of seeking,

in their "postlapsarian knowledge," a more authentic mode of being.²⁷ Sacrament, as both a means of reaching toward the Infinite, and a ritual which indicates purification of the heart, is rampant in O'Connor's writings.

Art and Intention

One connects Jesus and O'Connor in their relation to their work by critical generalities. These statements may answer some questions pertaining to authorial intent.

Jesus' well-known love and compassion for those to whom he brought his message can be seen to apply as well, although in a lesser form, to parabolic characters. Just as a writer's feelings about the validity of war will affect his depiction thereof (cf. Remarque and Jones), so too a feeling for the inherent integrity of people carries over into one's created characters.

O'Connor was no stranger to the sympathetic approach. Although critics often complain that she is harshly sarcastic, what they actually see is a "sympathy untouched by the sentimental"²⁸ or "her sense of universal charity and compassion"²⁹ both of which respect characters enough to allow them to be imperfect. As the girl in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" shows "the religious complexity of mankind" in her attitudinal "combination of devotion, awe, pride, and pre-adolescent fantasy"³⁰ so do all O'Connor's characters show how, according to O'Connor, "good and evil

appear to be joined in every culture at the spine."³¹ The religious person whose love includes all those who are broken or incomplete

does not pretend that the inadequate is adequate, the strange is familiar, or the queer is normal, for he is not compelled to the falsely generous blindness in which one ignores reality and calls one's forced ignorance "love." In contrast, since he is truly capable of love, he can accept man in his fallen state without scorn or arrogance.³²

Like her Palestinian predecessor, O'Connor did not feel the need to be gratuitously liberal; grace is enough. Her artistic vision was

fundamentally unmoved by pity and terror, and could consequently view our worldly struggle against pity and terror with humorous, rather than sardonic, irony. She was in a position to see the surface of lives, of which we make a great deal of sentimental nonsense, in relation to a more profound view of life.³³

O'Connor understood her own compassion and articulated her position. She understood compassion to possess a better but less-employed meaning,

the sense of being in travail with and for creation in its subjection to vanity. This is a sense which implies a recognition of sin; this is a suffering-with, but one which blunts no edges and makes no excuses.³⁴

A compassion which allows no illusions is surely the most

difficult and the most gracious form of sympathy.

In criticism, there is always a tendency to attach a story or corpus of work to the biographical details of an author's life. The author generally detests this practice, since it tends to pry into his personal past; critics love it because it always has some validity, since one must use details of observable reality as points of reference in fiction.

But to have any real value, art must be non-referential to the artist's life. Vía, arguing for the aesthetic coherence of the parables, finds their independent life more important than any references or allusions to Jesus' ministry.³⁵ "Since the parable is a work of art" Jones elaborates, "it should be judged as such; and its being a work of art should be a pointer to its potentiality and use."³⁶ So the story as art form is the basic understanding upon which all other assertions or assumptions should rest.

O'Connor knew that, in "studying literature, the intentions of the writer have to be found in the work itself, not in his life." Moreover, "a work of art exists without its author from the moment the words are on the paper," to the extent that the greater the work, the less important the biographical details of the author's life.³⁷ The only duty the author owes the reader is the production of a living, organic work, for as long as an author presents a vital, living work, "however eccentric its life may seem to the general reader," that work must be dealt with

on its own terms.³⁸ The form of the story must grow organically from its own unique material.³⁹ O'Connor's stories "exist on their own complex terms and within their own profound sense of the mystery of sin and grace."⁴⁰ O'Connor chided the modern world's forgetting that a work of art is a good in itself,⁴¹ asserting: "When you write a story, you only have to write one story, but there will always be people who will refuse to read the story you have written."⁴² The many motivations for writing: "to make money or to express your soul or to insure civil rights or to irritate your grandmother" will be secondary to the validity and autonomy of the written work.⁴³ No matter the motivation, O'Connor used art to explain truth. Discussion on this level eliminates the side issues of artistic intent and target audience.⁴⁴

The parables are indicative of a kind of mind. While all literature falls into this category, Jesus' parables show one who could see life as both unique and continuing, both beautiful and dangerous.⁴⁵ Jesus expressed his whole personality in creating the parables.

O'Connor found both the conscious and unconscious mind to have a stake in the writing of fiction.⁴⁶ Although one critic sourly believes her to be not "portraying Southern life as much as her own lurid sensations of religious life,"⁴⁷ another finds her language more "prophetic, kerygmatic, existential, and sacramental."⁴⁸ O'Connor's basic humor and keen clarity of vision can be seen in her written comments about the silence of the

Catholic novelist on his inability to produce good fiction. "We hear from editors, schoolteachers, moralists and housewives; anyone living considers himself an authority on fiction. The novelist, on the other hand, is supposed to be like Mr. Jarrell's pig that didn't know what bacon was."⁴⁹ And again:

Technique is a word they all trot out. I talked to a writer's club once, and during the question time, one good soul said, "Will you give me the technique for the frame-within-a-frame story?" I had to admit I was so ignorant I didn't even know what that was, but she assured me there was such a thing because she had entered a contest to write one and the prize was fifty dollars.⁵⁰

In such comments, O'Connor showed how her insight, humor, and compassion seeped from her life into her fiction. Having reconciled her Christianity and artistic excellence, one "can relax from the high, serious, intense approach to Miss O'Connor and enjoy her comic art."⁵¹ "It is not just that O'Connor, like Swift or Nathaniel West, finds the world capricious and incongruous, grotesque and violent, but that she, in a sense, prefers it that way."⁵² Taking the roundabout route to find truth, she looks for normality in craziness, God in the morally bankrupt, and grace in those who deny the existence of God.⁵³ O'Connor finds life and people to be "absolutes, sharp knives without handles."⁵⁴ In both technique and content, O'Connor affirmed the goodness of God by showing how He "writes straight with crooked lines; the crooked lines are the paradoxes, the grotesqueries,

the experiential oxymorons, and the deceiving, complex ironies which she used to express her persistent and inflexible Christian theme."⁵⁵ Another critic discusses O'Connor's intent, which may be that "a good look at sickness may redefine health, a good look at villains may redefine heroes, escalations into narcotic trance may reassert the 'bliss of the commonplace.'"⁵⁶ Thus, the grotesque, both a mode of vision and a means to a calculated end, stirs up the modern reader and shocks him out of his complacency about evil and his own failings. O'Connor shows man not "his own face but the face of a stranger, a comic and grotesque face that bears a disturbing resemblance to his own."⁵⁷ This vision's ultimate purpose is comedy; O'Connor believed

that man is a comic figure in his alienation from God; that God Himself has turned the tragedy of sin into a joke by means of the redemption. Once we accept the Incarnation, all the grotesqueness of our lives, all the painful inadequacies of humanity cease to be tragic. They must be understood in their comic dimensions by anyone who wants to see reality in its fullness.⁵⁸

O'Connor, in her perception of reality as grotesquely unique, showed her own unique and catholic way of looking at reality: grotesquely funny.

The parables, standing on a foundation of Messianic Authority, are based on Jesus' understanding and acceptance of his place in the order of eternity and in the flux of time.⁵⁹ From his faith in God's goodness and his clear understanding of his position, Jesus constructed the parables.⁶⁰

O'Connor found no need to preach, deciding to "safely leave evangelizing to the evangelists."⁶¹ Her understanding of compassion "especially in the derivative sense of this word, suffering with"⁶² led to a vision so large "in spirit, colossal in skill, and so rich in vision: that "it takes no special training to know that one has been ushered into the presence of greatness."⁶³ O'Connor's vision of life encompasses "the staggering complexity of reality from a Christian point of view"⁶⁴ as her following statement indicates. "If many are called and few are chosen, fewer still perhaps choose, even unconsciously, to be Christian, and yet all of reality is the potential kingdom of Christ, and the face of the earth is waiting to be recreated by his spirit."⁶⁵ Her view of life is medieval in that "she accepts Christian orthodoxy as naturally as if schisms had never occurred, as seriously and as stringently as if she were a contemporary of Geoffrey Chaucer rather than of John O'Hara."⁶⁶ Her position is similar to that of some Christian existentialists:

Good, for man living under the dispensation of the fall, is constant awareness of one's finitude and the nearness of death; it is living each moment with absolute fidelity to that truth and with resolute honesty in accepting one's fears and anxieties and acknowledging one's frailties. It is, above all, living without illusions, recognizing the vulnerability of the self but also recognizing a transcendent Power which sustains the self even in its moments of greatest anxiety and deepest despair.⁶⁷

"Open and free observation," wrote O'Connor, "is founded on our

ultimate faith that the universe is meaningful,"⁶⁸ although Catholics are apt to forget "that what is to us an extension of sight is to the rest of the world a peculiar and arrogant blindness."⁶⁹ Her Christian purity of the first century, "when to be civilized was the opposite of to be Christian"⁷⁰ shows O'Connor as out of step with the prevailing mode of the time as were the early martyrs. The present age "doubts both fact and value" and "is swept this way and that by momentary convictions. Instead of reflecting a balance from the world around him, the novelist now has to achieve one from a felt balance."⁷¹ Thus, O'Connor needed her firmness of conviction, because the society around her had no convictions at all. Her "absolute heart and head knowledge of time and place"⁷² gave O'Connor the grounding which could lead critics to speculate that she "may be the only writer of English or American fiction in this century whose style, down to the very placing of a comma, is derived from a religious feeling for the simplest actualities."⁷³ Her "anagogical vision" or ability "to see different levels of reality in one image or situation,"⁷⁴ she developed as fully as possible, aided by her firm basis in faith.

Jesus' intent in composing the parables was to use them as the building blocks of faith. They prepare one for the kingdom of God in a very special way. More than any theological concept, they are basic expressions of truth,⁷⁵ perhaps more basic than conceptual thought itself.⁷⁶ The image conveys the message, by the way it functions on the audience.

O'Connor turned reading fiction into a "process of reorganization" by shocking elements which focus the mind on the immediate mystery and, ultimately, on the source of all mystery.⁷⁷ Although "too robustly profane for the religious idealist and too dogmatically spiritual for the naturalist"⁷⁸ O'Connor considered herself as valid a prophet as any from the Old Testament.

Those who believe that art proceeds from a healthy, and not from a diseased, faculty of the mind will take what he [the writer] shows them as a revelation, not of what we ought to be but of what we are at a given time and under given circumstances; that is, as a limited revelation but revelation nevertheless.⁷⁹

A scrap of paper found among her books affirms the difficulty of this mission: "Faith breeds faith but faith in this age is as dead as Sara's womb. When we believe today, we believe like Abraham." Feeley elaborates: "Only the faith of Abraham--who believed the word of God when all human reality seemed to negate it--would be strong enough to form the spiritual basis on which the stories rest."⁸⁰ Thus, faith led O'Connor to write fiction extending "beyond sects and dogmas" to embrace "all mankind."⁸¹ Her sympathies went "directly to those aspects of Southern life where the religious feeling is most intense and where its outward forms are farthest from the Catholic, and most revealing of a need that only the Church can fill."⁸² Attacking "the gods of the Century of the Common Man" as well as "the shabby pieties of the intellectual marketplace" and "the secular trinity of Darwin, Freud and Marx"⁸³ O'Connor incarnates "the

specters of sin, guilt and judgement...in violent, perverse, and monstrous form to plague our uneasy, godless era."⁸⁴ Her writings

may be conceived as an effort to recover the idea of the Holy in an age in which both the meaning and the reality of this concept has been obscured; that she perceived that loss of the Holy involved for contemporary man a concomitant loss of "depth" and a subsequent diminution of being; and that she further understood that in reclaiming depth and being (filling the "ontological void" posited by Ionesco and other modern writers), contemporary man might very well become involved in a journey through the radically profane, embracing evil in order to rediscover good, pursuing the demonic in order finally to arrive at the Holy.⁸⁵

Her vision, constructed so as to be transferred to the reader whole, always involves the position of the godless reader.⁸⁶ For her, life revolved around "the central Christian mystery: that it has, for all its horror, been found by God to be worth dying for."⁸⁷ To communicate this vision, and change that of the reader into her own, is O'Connor's undisguised intent. Many of her stories "have the lethal immediacy of a loaded shotgun. One finally feels that they ought to be labeled: 'Dangerous. Handle with care.' But then so, for that matter, ought the Gospels."⁸⁸ Her stories show the difficulty of faith, and the importance "that the Church gather us in even when we do not deserve it, even when we do not want to be embraced."⁸⁹ O'Connor hoped to inspire the humility and "real love of truth" which are required "to raise oneself and by hard labor to acquire higher standards."⁹⁰ She sought this end through a theology not

"rationalistic, conceptual, or even conceptualizable," but one faithful to and inseparable from its literary form.⁹¹ Through the use of "the image that is reality" and "richer than thought"⁹² O'Connor helped to prepare her reader to search out and welcome grace into his life.⁹³ Such an eventuality certainly took precedence in her mind over any literary goal.

Summary

The parables can be characterized in part by their brevity and compression. O'Connor's stories attest to her adeptness at the swift turn of phrase and the swift turn of events. She achieves this effect without sacrificing the unity and coherence of the characters' world. The parables are uniquely Jesus' creations and each is uniquely original, a world without any need for external reference. O'Connor, too, produced people and places which are totally convincing in their own quirkiness. The parables speak a creative mind which is totally objective toward both characters and perceived reality. O'Connor refused to coddle either her audience or her characters. She had the same respect for their individuality and free will that she had for that of any living person. The parables integrate the temporal and the eternal in the same moment, even in the same image. O'Connor spent her whole literary career perfecting this kind of presentation. Her stories and their meaning cannot be separated.

Jesus' parables attest to their creator's love and compassion for both God's children and his created characters. O'Connor possesses the same sympathy; in the same way, her feeling for her characters is always edged with a respect which has no room for sentimental pity. Grace takes the place of subjective liberality. The works of both Jesus and O'Connor may be seen as non-referential to the creator's life. Although biographical study can yield insight, the works of these two can stand independently of such details, and still retain all their inherent interest. But while the parables and the stories need not relate to the life of their creator, they attest to a kind of creative bent. Jesus' personality, as well as his perception, shows through. O'Connor knew and used her whole personality, her whole being, to create her stories. Just as Jesus constructed his parables on the basis of the authority which his role as Messiah provided, so O'Connor wrote her stories from the foundation of her Catholic faith and a belief in her own mission as a writer. Jesus used his parables to show the kingdom of God to those around him, and to bring them to the same kingdom; O'Connor also called her stories to preach to the multitudes, perhaps bringing in those who least understand, and yet most need, God's mercy.

NOTES FOR CHAPTER V

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⁹OC-M, p. 76.

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²¹Davenport, p. 1473.

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²⁵Detweiler, p. 239.

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²⁷Browning, Flannery O'Connor, p. 129.

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³³Montgomery, "Miss O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted," p. 672.

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³⁵in Perrin, p. 145.

³⁶Jones, p. 109.

³⁷OC-M, p. 126.

³⁸OC-M, p. 39.

³⁹OC-M, p. 102.

⁴⁰Solotaroff, p. 13.

⁴¹OC-M, p. 171.

⁴²OC-M, p. 95.

⁴³OC-M, p. 66.

⁴⁴OC-M, p. 65.

⁴⁵Dodd, p. 5.

⁴⁶OC-M, p. 101.

⁴⁷Solotaroff, p. 13.

⁴⁸Detweiler, p. 238.

⁴⁹OC-M, p. 194.

⁵⁰OC-M, p. 89.

⁵¹Montgomery, "Beyond Symbol and Surface," pp. 191-2.

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⁵³True, "Flannery O'Connor," p. 223.

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⁵⁵Martin, The True Country, p. 241.

⁵⁶Weller Embler, Metaphor and Meaning (DeLand, Fla.:Everett/

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⁵⁷Edelstein, p. 144.

⁵⁸Jeremy, p. 198.

⁵⁹Dodd, p. 10.

⁶⁰Jones, p. 210.

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⁶⁷Browning, Flannery O'Connor, p. 71.

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⁷²Robert Drake, "The Paradigm of Flannery O'Connor's True Country," Studies in Short Fiction 6 (1968), 437.

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⁷⁵Harrington, p. 20.

⁷⁶Funk, in Perrin, p. 176.

⁷⁷Brinkmeyer, pp. 314-15.

⁷⁸Eggenschweiler, p. 13.

⁷⁹OC-M, p. 34.

⁸⁰Feeley, Voice, p. 84.

⁸¹Feeley, Voice, p. 13.

⁸²OC-M, p. 207.

⁸³J. O. Tate, "The Uses of Banality," The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin 4 (1975), 19.

⁸⁴Detweiler, p. 235.

⁸⁵Browning, Flannery O'Connor, pp. 13-14.

⁸⁶OC-M, p. 162.

⁸⁷OC-M, p. 146.

⁸⁸Robert Drake, "Hair-Curling Gospel," The Christian Century 82 (1965), 656.

⁸⁹William Koon, "'Help Me Not to be so Mean,'" The Southern Review 15, n.s. (1979), 332.

⁹⁰OC-M, p. 189.

⁹¹Faricy, in Feeley, Voice, p. 15.

⁹²Guardini, in Orvell, p. 27.

⁹³Brinkmeyer, p. 315.

Chapter VI

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

One can easily see that Jesus and O'Connor constructed their stories along parallel tracks. Although O'Connor probably did not consciously imitate her Master, she knew the parables and may have subconsciously imitated them. Certain biographical similarities; a sense of early death and an understanding of a unique purpose in life, make comparisons very intreaging. Just as Jesus changed the form of the parable to suit his own ends, so O'Connor made the short story form uniquely her own. Both produced stories which must be understood and discussed in their entirety. Although discussion of elements is essential, one must always view the story as one information-unit. Thus, acomplex, somewhat inaccessible thought may be understood to reside in an image which is the totality of the story, the metaphor.

Whereas Jesus used either the tragic or the comic plot mode, O'Connor combined the two to form a type of story which seems to block direct response. Both stories are contained principally in some kind of meeting or encounter between two characters. Both

take compression to its very limits, putting more story into less words than most writers use to introduce their characters. Both stories are told in strict chronological order, without attempt at stylistic experimentation. The stories are not meant as intellectual exercises which serve only to pique the mind; they are serious challenges to spiritual response from which one can gauge his own readiness to enter the kingdom of God. Jesus developed, and O'Connor followed, a form ideally suited to this purpose. Both parables and stories contain no ending except the reader's response. In this way, the stories fit into many social contexts -- the context of the listener or reader. In both, structural unity and parallelism point to that moment which is a question, the unprovided ending. The simplicity of the characters makes them universal, while their peculiarity gives them life. Their poverty and secular behavior do not impair their ability to react to grace independently and autonomously. In O'Connor, the prophet and the demonic characters are often the same ones. Through their evilness, they bring others to waiting grace. The naturalistic settings of parables and stories convince one of the reality of the stories as the improbable elements thwart expectation and serve to draw one into the story. Both creators made stories which respect both the audience and the integrity of the story itself. Although used for other ends than mere entertainment, these stories are never manipulated.

The purpose of the careful construction of elements is the

shock and conversion of the audience. The stories work this way by intriguing, drawing in, and presenting the listener with a choice. One understands this choice to be, on some momentous or trivial level, between life and death. No matter how one judges the story, this decision carries over into the second element of the analogy. This second element might be the kingdom of Heaven, Son of Man, action of grace, or nature of God. Whatever the comparison, one judges himself when he judges the characters. The passive and active roles switch, so the story becomes a kind of moral yeast, leavening the listener so that grace may descend. The story, as a single image, is retained in the mind, communicating a thought inadequately expressed by a maxim or saying. One's response to this call explains both the story and one's own eternal position. Instead of judging people, God allows them to judge others, then allows that judgement to apply to the person, with grace introducing the possibility of a more merciful decision, if the person allows it. Implicit in the action of the stories on the reader are the themes of ever-eminent grace and the danger of rejecting that grace. Because of divergent reactions to these stories, critics have different beliefs about the artists' motives.

Some motives are clear enough. Economy, uniqueness of story, and a distanced perspective on the stories are some of the literary virtues shared by these two creators. They used these strong points to bring their love and compassion to the

audience. Neither ever "talked down" to the audience; neither ever compromised artistic vision for easy answers. Both parables and O'Connor's stories can easily exist apart from biographical details of the creator's life, although they indicate a mind which could create vivid images and which relied on a sense of true purpose for support of the stories. Both made stories which could turn the audience from error toward God's saving grace.

In examining the works of Jesus and O'Connor together, one can clearly see that they correspond in elemental, thematic, and stylistic points. They are written the same; they act the same. Therefore, an understanding of the parabolic research of the last century aids in understanding the stories of O'Connor. Further, they help one integrate the different and divergent criticisms which O'Connor critics offer the reader. The purpose of this study, then, seems to be accomplished by a comparison of the stories with Jesus' parables. Therefore, the thesis, that examining the parabolic exegetical literature with the criticisms on O'Connor leads to a clearer understanding, is valid.

Recommendations

O'Connor critics must see the stories in terms of their action on the reader, as well as collections of interesting elements. The scope of her writings is large in the context

of what she was attempting. O'Connor attempts a definite relationship with her reader through the story. To ignore this direct line of communication is to risk misunderstanding.

Very little study of the parables as literary creations has been accomplished. Students of literature seem uninterested, too often delegating them to the realm of myth or setting them aside for the theologian. However, parables contain much for the student of literature. In their tiny stories are themes basic to literature. In their mechanism, they operate unlike most fiction. Future scholars may want to look again at the stories of Jesus, perhaps comparing them to the works of short story writers other than O'Connor in the hope of finding some correlation of internal elements, meaning, or intent. The parables are a kind of literature, even if oral literature. Their archetypal patterns are far from those of Homer or Genesis. Yet, they are as popularly familiar as the well-known sayings of Shakespeare. They need to be recognized and understood as unique literary contributions. If comparison will aid in the understanding of other writers, then such should be accomplished. However, interpretation is needed which places the parables in the field of literature rather than just in the realm of theological debate.

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