

## **Flannery O'Connor's Quest**

Mattie Daniels Thomas, Professor of English/Chairperson, Department of English and Foreign Languages, Alabama A. and M. University

Flannery O'Connor's fiction, written in the mid-twentieth century, depicts grotesque characters who are hard of hearing and almost spiritually blind. Consequently, violence is often used to foster their spirituality. In *Mystery and Manners*, O'Connor describes her Christian belief as "the engine that makes her perception operate" (109). Such a statement may cause the reader to expect a direct emphasis on religious matters in her fiction, but she generally depicts a world characterized by greed, pride and a lack of moral vision. The tension between what the writer says and what she portrays in her stories produces a need to reconcile her Christian faith with what John Hawkes calls the devil's voice in her fiction ("Flannery O'Connor's Devil" 396).

Speaking of this duality in her writing, O'Connor says her subject is the action of grace in a territory held largely by the devil (*Mystery* 117). Yet, in spite of the devil's large territory, she believes that man is still redeemable when his actions are assisted by grace (*Mystery* 196-197). Grace is Divine will which acts for the spiritual well being of mankind. It is a supernatural gift of God to intellectual creatures for their eternal salvation. It is therefore an expression of God's generosity and mercy. God's grace draws man toward an infinite truth, the truth of the divinity of Christ and man's identification with Him. It also illuminates that truth. When it is imparted to him, man "sees" and appreciates the reality of Christ.

Grace manifests itself in various ways in O'Connor's fiction. It operates through a water stain in "The Enduring Chill," the opening of the sky in "Revelation" and a fiery vision in Parker's Back." As different as these manifestations are, they all employ some aspect of the natural world, the world which O'Connor calls manners, as opposed to the supernatural, or what she calls mystery. This is in keeping with her belief that "grace, to the Catholic way of thinking, can and does use as its medium the imperfect, purely human and even the hypocritical" (*The Habit of Being* 389).

Her characters are grotesque because they think they are self sufficient, but never because they are totally depraved or without hope of redemption. Though myopic and unaware of their spiritual potential, they are inclined toward good, for God's goodness, expressed through grace, pulls them toward redemption. They do not participate in the redemptive act through Christian beliefs and rituals. Instead, they take trips that lead them to violence, displacement and sometimes death. Those trips intimate that life is a quest, painful and difficult, but moving mysteriously toward blessedness. The degree to which her characters understand that determines the outcome of their quests. Violence shakes some of them into an awareness of their inability to save themselves, and they achieve redemption. Others do not achieve it because they deny the existence of spiritual reality and abandon the inclination to follow the promptings of grace. For others, the quest is incomplete because they are too nearsighted to see beyond the literal meaning of their journeys. They cannot fuse what O'Connor calls mystery and manners.

### **The Achieved Quest**

The fusion of mystery and manners is the reality to be apprehended in "The Artificial Nigger," the short story in which the quest is most fully achieved. Embodied in his efforts to teach his grandson Nelson humility by exposing him to the dangers of false pride, Mr. Head's quest becomes an experience in which the secular and the spiritual are synthesized. The process, however, is difficult because the protagonist's impulse to embrace mystery is diluted by the

distractions of the city as well as his rationalism and perverted vision. In spite of his difficulties, Mr. Head's efforts to teach Nelson a lesson lead him to his own spiritual awakening. The story works at the realistic, allegorical, moral, and anagogic levels. The shifting of levels becomes obvious to the reader, but Mr. Head, thinking mainly on the realistic level, blunders upon an image which provides his moral and anagogical insight.

The realistic narrative describes a chaotic trip to Atlanta with emphasis on problems between the grandfather and grandson, Negroes and Caucasians. This is the level at which Mr. Head's vision is focused. He thinks that knowledge acquired through reason is sufficient; therefore, he aims to teach his grandson a "moral lesson" through rational means. He assumes that the ugliness of the city will destroy the boy's false pride in having been born there. This lesson, of course, will not only help Nelson, but it will also boost the grandfather's pride by making him feel like a great guide. He compares himself to "the great guides of men." "He might have been Virgil summoned in the middle of the night to go to Dante, or better, Raphael awakened by a blast of God's light to fly to the side of Tobias" (*Complete Stories* 250).

Mr. Head discovers that finding his way is an extremely difficult task in the city with its maze of unfamiliar streets. As he explains the sewer system to Nelson, his Dantesque allusion implies allegorical meaning. He says that the sewer, containing rats and drainage, underlines the entire city. "A man could slide into it and be sucked along down endless pitch black tunnels. At any minute any man in the city might be sucked into the sewer and never be heard from again" (*Complete Stories* 259). His description is so vivid that Nelson immediately connects the sewer passages with the entrance to hell. The recurring circular motif in which the travelers move suggests that they are lost in a Dantesque hell, and, like Dante and Virgil, must journey through the city of woe before achieving their goal. They are indeed two souls in quest of redemption, but Mr. Head is not the trustworthy guide he assumes himself to be. Furthermore, the old man needs more than his own judgment to find his way through the city. He thinks he can go back to the station by keeping his eyes on the terminal dome, but reliance of self leads to lost direction and denial. In fact, at the moral level, "The Artificial Nigger" is a story about the failure of reason and the need for mercy and redemption.

Mr. Head's tendency toward faith or denial is worked out largely through his relationship to Negroes. He warns his grandson of the evils of the city which will be "full of niggers" and aims to use his grandson's ignorance of them to force humility upon the child. When Nelson exhibits a magnetic attraction to a Negro woman and asks her for direction, his grandfather scolds him. Yet, in spite of Mr. Head's perverted vision and his rationalism, it is a stereotypical statue of a Negro that helps him link mystery and manners. Standing before the "Artificial Nigger" he recognizes his own depravity and realizes that the action of mercy has "covered his pride like a flame and consumed it" (*Complete Stories* 270).

The image of the artificial Negro is a familiar one in O'Connor's native South. It embodies a portion of the history of her region, raises moral questions, and tells a story of suffering. Hence, she uses its richness to "instruct" Mr. Head, who is obviously not aware of the teachings and rituals of the church, the more orthodox way of achieving redemption. His hatred of Negroes causes him to focus his attention on them and insures his sense of mystery. As O'Connor says, "the devil covers a good deal of groundwork before grace is effective" (*Mystery* 117).

### **The Denied Quest**

Unlike Mr. Head and Nelson, Joy Hulga in “Good Country People” denies the impulse to embrace mystery. She regards religious faith as nonsense, and seeks to lose and find herself in the Bible salesman. In doing so, she stubbornly rejects the Goodward pull of grace. Her refusal to accept grace when it is offered removes her from the true center of reality in O’Connor’s world. Removal from that center is symbolized by her wooden leg, poor vision and immaturity.

“Good County People” is a story about a thirty-two-year-old woman who has a Ph.D. in philosophy, a woman whose pride in her education separates her from the sources of grace and causes her to deny the existence of spiritual reality. Joy Hulga seeks to intellectualize her need for redemption. She claims to have no illusions and says she sees through to nothing. Salvation to her means pulling off the blindfold and seeing that there is nothing to see.

Believing in such nonsense as opposed to salvation, Joy-Hulga reveals her intellectual pride. Referring to the negative tone of such a story as “Good Country People,” O’Connor explains that the church tells her the necessity of fighting such nonsense (*Habit of Being*, 97).

Unlike the author, Joy lacks a sense of good and evil, and she has no weapon to combat such views. Consequently, her trip to the barn constitutes a journey of helplessness rather than blessedness.

Joy’s nay-saying is a choice that O’Connor attributes to the protagonist’s education, which has caused her to become preoccupied with matters of the mind and has destroyed in her that which gives life to the soul. Her weak heart is symbolic of that destruction; for singularly devoted to the head, she has ignored matters of the heart and alienated herself from God and her world. Her devotion to the intellect is probably best illustrated when she intellectualizes her first kiss. The extra surge of adrenalin which it produces goes straight to her brain. For her, the experience is a matter of “mind control” because she never allows her mind to yield to her feelings. Even her kiss is a vampirish act which seems to be aimed at drawing all the breath out of the Bible salesman.

Joy-Hulga is unconsciously seeking her own version of redemption in her attempted seduction of the Bible salesman. Her attraction to him, her willingness to go with him, her surrender to him of her glasses and her leg testify to the falseness of her claim. She accepts the salesman at face value, believing him to be a good Christian.

Joy-Hulga has found her own false road to redemption and her own false soul, the wooden leg. The other characters are attracted to the leg, and the salesman places it in his case between two hollow Bibles. It is obviously as miraculous as anything that she and the other characters know, and the theft is a spiritual defeat for Joy who has set herself above others. The leg is a vital part of her, the thing that makes her different; without it she is reduced to helplessness.

Joy-Hulga, without knowing it, is attracted to her double. The salesman, in his bright blue suit, toast-colored wide-brimmed hat, and yellow socks not pulled up far enough, is as shabbily attired as she. But she is no match for him, for not only is he a dragon who causes her to confront evil but he is also a trickster who changes his name at every house and changes his role from Christian to seducer to trickster as expediency demands.

In addition to her heart problem and her wooden leg, Joy’s name and her big spectacles also reflect her spiritual void. As soon as she is twenty-one and away from home she legally changes her name to Hulga. Arriving at the new name purely on the basis of its ugly sound, she imagines it working “like the ugly sweating Vulcan who stayed in the furnace and to whom the goddess had to come when called” (*Complete Stories* 275). She thought it her highest creative

act, one which signaled her mother's inability to turn her dust into joy. Instead, it signals her own ability to change herself into Hulga. Joy-Hulga's concern with changing herself by a new name and associating the act with the creative process is, however, a negative transformation. With her new ugly name, she acts ugly and has an ugly sounding walk.

Joy-Hulga Hopewell's change of name is appropriate in the sense that she is bereft of joy and hope, but her transformation is directly opposed to Christian rebirth such as that of Harry Ashfield who changes his name to Bevel as an indication of his redemption in "The River." Her creative act is a negative one similar to that of Mr. Fortune who likes to think of Mary Fortune Pitts "as being thoroughly of his clay" and tries to mold her into a duplication of himself.

As in many other O'Connor stories, physical vision suggests spiritual vision; the protagonist's big spectacles symbolize her spiritual blindness; they do not help her focus her world. In her pride, she thinks she is self-sufficient and claims that if she were not a heart patient she would be far away from her mother and the country people in the story. Her feeling of superiority is the cause of her seduction. She dreams of seducing the Bible salesman, assumes he is innocent, wants to take away his shame and change it into something useful. Never does she consider the possibility that he may be like her. She fails to notice when he takes her glasses and blindly helps him steal her artificial leg. Her misconception about herself blinds her to the truth about the salesman and assures his triumph.

O'Connor weds the characters' would-be love affair to their spiritual voids. The salesman opens a hollow Bible in which the Scriptures have been replaced by a flask of whiskey, a pornographic deck of cards, and a box of prophylactics. He places these items before Joy like "offerings at the shrine of a goddess" (*Complete Stories* 289). While the articles are relevant to sex, they, as well as Joy-Hulga's surrender, create a parody of the redemptive act. When she shows him how to take her artificial leg off, it is "like losing her own life and finding it again miraculously in his" (*Complete Stories* 289). Joy-Hulga, unlike Mr. Head who develops a new vision of his relationship to God and man, does not change her view of the salesman. The theft of the leg might be best described as the annihilation of her secular dignity, but there is no rebirth. In fact, the comedy and grotesqueness create a sense of detachment, causing the reader to feel that Joy's victimization is exactly what she deserves. Her contempt for life and her vanity are acts of will which cause her to plan her own downfall and fail to achieve her quest.

### **The Incomplete Quest**

In "Everything That Rises Must Converge" O'Connor uses a portion of Teilhard de Chardin's theory of Convergence to deepen her perception and require that her characters establish charitable human relationships in order to accept grace. Like Mr. Head who experiences a successful quest and Joy-Hulga who denies the quest, Julian and his mother in "Everything that Rises Must Converge" are also drawn Godward unconsciously. Their quests, however, are incomplete because they never see the falsity of their goals.

Blinded by pride, neither Julian nor his mother is able to see beyond manners. The mother has a false sense of superiority. She exhibits her pride through her belief that she is equal to her family history, her desire to live up to Chestney standards without having the money to do so, and her attempts to keep the past with its slavery, segregation, and social classes intact. Julian's efforts to break her spirit is his attempt to establish his superiority over her because he sees that the past to which she clings is gone forever. He, however, proves to be even blinder than she.

The literal bus trip which the mother and son take is an allegorical journey toward redemption which brings them to a confrontation with a black woman, who provides them a negative image of themselves and supplies the violence that could shock them into an awareness of their fallen nature. Julian's mother is too thoroughly stunned to know what has hit her, but the blow to his mother shakes Julian loose from his pride and leaves him at the brink of surrender.

The conflict over racial issues is a means of dramatizing the moral conflict in which the mother is destroyed because she does not recognize evil. Her lack of moral vision is suggested at the beginning of the story as she looks into the mirror. If she is to achieve redemption, she must see herself as she is. Instead, she discusses her hideous purple and green hat. It is perhaps a comic nimbus which also conveys her lack of moral knowledge. Just as Julian's mother fails to see herself reflected in the mirror, she also misses the second image of herself as portrayed by the black mother who wears a hat identical to hers and duplicates her pride in her son. Caught up in her fantasies of superiority—the Godhigh mansion, the Chestney name, her family plantation and Negroes, all from a past era—Julian's mother does not perceive the danger her dark counterpart poses. The proud and hostile black woman reacts violently to destroy Julian's mother.

At the moral level Julian's bus trip is a struggle with pride and hate. Whereas humility and moral vision would cause him to seek charitable relationships with other passengers, he prefers to withdraw into himself, thereby impeding his quest. He retreats into the "inner compartment of his mind," a mental bubble, in order to separate himself from the "general idiocy of his fellows" (*Complete Stories*, 411). From this perspective he can see others without permitting them to enter his world. Like Joy-Hulga, he has a false sense of intellectual superiority. Violence is therefore necessary to burst his bubble and destroy his contempt for others.

In his mind, Julian attempts to break his mother's spirit by taking credit for his own achievement, thinking that he has realized it in spite of her small mind, her efforts to dominate him and the inferior college to which she sent him. Wanting to believe that he has not been blinded by his love for her, he thinks of himself in favorable terms—"initiative," "first-rate education," "emotionally free"—and associates her with unfavorable terms—"third-rate college," "blinded by love," "small mind." In his attempt to detach himself from her, he even wishes her dead.

Julian fails to perceive his own fallen nature, but he can easily spot his mother's faults. He abhors her racism, yet he imagines himself an integrationist only to express his hate for her and declare himself superior to her. He has no more charity for Negroes than he does for his mother. His black friends, the black doctor who is the only attendant available when his mother is desperately ill, and his black bride are all products of his fantasy designed to horrify his mother. In reality he never succeeds in making any black friends, and he projects his antagonism for his mother into the black mother on the bus.

Since Julian and his mother are guilty of evil, they are forced into a crucial struggle that allows them an opportunity to be transformed. The black mother's role is to help the characters overcome their pride and bring love to the surface. Although she is an obvious depiction of the darker self of Julian's mother, she proves to be a reflection of Julian's darker self too.

Julian at first appears to be more alert than his mother. He notices that the black woman is wearing a hat like his mother's and that her pride in her son is equal to his own mother's pride in him. He also sees that the two women have exchanged sons through their seating arrangement. However, he merely picks up surface details:

...a large, gaily dressed, sullen-looking colored woman got on with a little boy.... Julian hoped that he would sit down beside him and that the woman would push in beside his mother.... There was something familiar-looking about her but Julian could not place what it was... Her face was set not only to meet opposition but to seek it out.... Her bulging figure was encased in a green crepe dress and her feet overflowed in red shoes. She had on a hideous hat. A purple velvet flap came down on one side of it and stood up on the other; the rest of it was green and looked like a cushion with the stuffing out. She carried a mammoth red pocket book that bulged throughout as if it were stuffed with rocks. (*Complete Stories*, 415)

Julian does not quickly perceive what the woman has in common with his mother. At first she is merely “familiar-looking.” The woman is seated beside him before he recognizes the source of her familiarity. His reaction is delayed, but he is delighted when the vision of the two identical hats strikes him. His reaction reflects the superficiality of his recognition and provides a sharp contrast to his own estimate of his intellect. Unaware of the threat which the bulging woman beside him poses, Julian is pleased that her hat, a duplication of his mother’s hat, will humiliate his mother. What is even more crucial, he projects his own arrogance upon the world as he desires to punish his mother through the black woman.

His problem at this point is his inability to see beyond manners. He lives in a world of fantasy in which everything that rises does not converge, for he thinks he is rising through his superiority and he sees no need for charity, the means through which he could be united with her. He simply knows that he is embarrassed by his mother who, he thinks, hides her shallowness in ancient manners and recollections of family history. He knows that he must ride the bus with her and be embarrassed by her friendly stupidities. As the bus trip progresses he becomes more irritated, plots to embarrass her, and he sees the black woman only in terms of her usefulness to his scheme of petty revenge.

Preoccupied with the woman’s appearance and her usefulness to his scheme, Julian cannot see that the black woman is also a revelation of his own wayward self. Her sullenness, eagerness for conflict and arrogance duplicate the salient traits of his own character. Julian, however, interprets the woman as his mother’s double and sees only a social meaning in her attack when he tells his mother:

Don’t think that was just an uppity Negro woman. That was the whole colored race which will no longer take your condescending pennies. That was your black double. She can wear the same hat as you, and to be sure...it looked better on her than it did on you. What all this means is that the old world is gone. The old manners are obsolete and your graciousness is not worth a damn. (*Complete Stories*, 419)

Julian, his vision limited to social matters, does not perceive the black woman to be the external dragon which he, as well as his mother, must pass mysteriously. She turns his comedy grim by destroying his pride when she attacks his mother.

Violence can initiate a character into mystery as it does the grandmother in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find.” Julian does not experience such an initiation, but his response to his mother’s death causes him to shake off his pride and cry, “Mother! Darling, sweetheart, wait!” Julian’s spontaneous language is affectionate, and it indicates a possibility for love. Yet the opportunity to converge with her eludes him as “the tide of darkness sweeps him back to her, postponing from moment to moment his entry into the world of guilt and sorrow” (*Complete Stories*, 420). The story ends with the impending change in Julian and his struggling toward light out of spiritual darkness.

The world of guilt and sorrow is apparently a world in which Julian must come to terms with his fallen nature, but he never does that in the course of the story. Although he is forced out of himself toward redemption, he fails to achieve it because he never sees himself for what he is. His mother's death forces him to the brink of revelation, but his blindness to spiritual truth—"the tide of darkness"—holds him back. Julian, then, gains no real knowledge of evil, and his trip does not end with redemption. Unlike Joy-Hulga, a nay-sayers, Julian does not deny the existence of a spiritual reality. His mind, however, is so filled with notions of his superiority that he views the world only in terms of his own self-esteem.

Much fiction lies outside the quest motif in O'Connor's fiction. The sense of place, her sense of humor many of her minor characters, the speech habits, and the whole texture of Southern life add a richness of reference and a diversity of texture that give her stories that quality of felt life that Henry James so prized. Yet the quest for redemption, whether achieved, denied or incomplete, is central to her fiction.

## References

- Hawkes, John. "Flannery O'Connor's Devil." *Sewanee Review* 70 (Summer 1962);396.  
O'Connor, Flannery. *The Complete Stories*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971.  
----. *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor*: Ed. Sally Fitzgerald. New York: Vintage Books, 1980.  
----. *Mystery and Manners*. ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969.

Published by the Forum on Public Policy

Copyright © The Forum on Public Policy. All Rights Reserved. 2008.