THE TECHNIQUE OF THE GROTESQUE IN THE WRITINGS OF FLANNERY O'CONNOR

A Monograph presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
Morehead State University

In partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts

by
Carol Stumbo
August, 1968
Accepted by the faculty of the School of Humanities, Morehead State University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree.

Chairman

Director of Monograph

Master's Committee: Charles J. Self, Chairman

James Still

H. K. Thompson

July 27, 1938
(date)
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. Introduction to the Nature of the Proposed Study</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement on the problem presented to the Southern writer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O'Connor's position in her Literary Tradition</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of the term grotesque</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Comic Tradition</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survey of Nature of humor</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis of Humor in O'Connor's Works</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Symbolism and Violence</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature of Symbolism in O'Connor's work</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis of O'Connor's Symbolism</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

Because the South is still a region involved in a complex problem, the South and the southern writer must be approached, of necessity, with skepticism. William Faulkner has defined the problem of the South well in his explanation of time: "There is no such thing as WAS—only IS. If WAS existed, there would be no grief or sorrow."¹ For the South, there is not yet a past tense. If the facts of her history had receded to the point of "WAS," the people of the South perhaps would not still be engaging in the civil rights struggle. Her myths have not been buried or forgotten. "It (the South) is haunted by Robert E. Lee, of course, and by Jeb Stuart, by Medgar Evans and Emmett Till, by James Bowie and Huey Long and Bunk Johnson, and William Faulkner. The dreams of the South are heavy and long."² The South has not yet been able to resolve problems initiated more than a hundred years ago and because she has retained so much, a mythical south is part of her present. Caution must be used in dealing with southern literature; the temptation of repeating generalizations and the myths of the South itself is strong. A grasp upon reality in the problem that the South's past creates is difficult.

In the early twentieth century, H. L. Mencken scoffed at the scarcity of southern letters. At mid-century, the condition has so changed that Gore Vidal has complained: "Southern writing—we have had so much of it." Since the declaration of the Fugitives in Nashville during the twenties, the rest of the nation has become aware of the force and the distinctive qualities of southern literature. And if the South lives in a complex historical maze, her writers have fared no better. Before Flannery O'Connor's death in August 1964, she had to confront the problem of being a "southern writer" and she found the task of distinguishing between what was the mythical and the real in southern literature a difficult task.

Definition itself for the southerner begins in the literary tradition of the South. Caroline Gordon has related the incident of the critic who read O'Connor's work and declared that had the name not appeared, he would have been unable to distinguish her from Capote or McCullers. The statement indicates that either there is such a close bond between the writers of the South that no real distinctions can be made, or that the vision of the reader is undiscriminating beyond the recognition of certain conventions of southern writing. Even those critics who are anxious to recognize O'Connor's individual talent find it difficult to by-pass the obstacle that her literary heritage has created. "I believe she can be got at without reference to Faulkner or Warren," James Murray wrote in The Critic. But that such a declaration

---


must be made points to the depth of the problem itself and the task of ignoring Faulkner is incredible. Faulkner has done much to make real the mythical South and to create literary techniques and characters that the newer Southern writers are under compulsion to confront.

In fact, so strong is Faulkner's possession of the south that Wright Morris interprets the raw image of souther life now prevailing in fiction as a result of Faulkner's imagination rather than the condition of southern life itself. "This bondage will persist, these facts will seem the real ones, until another writer, with his own spell, removes Faulkner's enchantment to replace it with his own." 5 Though Faulkner was not the first writer to create the character of the southerner, the broad humor, or the "grotesque" character, he was the first major writer to do so, and since then, these elements have become those that the reader expects to find in southern writing.

There are a set of rather loosely defined characteristics that have become associated with southern writing. The terms "gothic" and "grotesque" are applied with unliterary inexactness to the literature of the south. "Gothic" seems to imply the presence of dark, mysterious, and supernatural happenings, grotesque no more than the presence of deformed characters or events. If the individual is not deformed, he is expected to be the type of character that Faulkner has created in the Snoppe clan, a character shrewd, ignorant, or shiftless and humorous in his shiftiness. What is not expected in southern literature is the appearance of a character from the middle class

--

or upper class. The writing is expected to reflect the environment of these creatures, the "river of sound, holy-runner shouters and the incantations of the Bible, Beer-drinking, honky-tonk music and gospel songs." 6

Southern literature is known for its violent element: murder, suicide, incest, and rape are familiar to the southern mind. Absalom! Absalom! involves the murder of two men; one is the suitor of a boy's sister. The brother returns from the war, kills his half-brother, and deposits him at his sister's feet. The father later is killed by one of his field hands for seducing his daughter and fathering a child. Violence seems to be a part of southern literature. Tennessee Williams' drama is also noted for its violence, as is Warren's, McCullers', and O'Connor's fiction. Critics have pointed to the south's own violent history for explanation; its past has included dueling, lynching, the hunt of the Ku Klux Klan and the brutality of frontier life. Violence is not an uncommon quality to the southerner's life.

Despite the southern writer's sense of violence, he is known for his possession of humor—even if it becomes at times a black, fierce comedy. The nature of the southern comedy is distinctive. The humorist never aims at free, innocent humor, but humor based upon the grotesque or the pathetic. This humor and other qualities are considered part of the bag of southern literary techniques.

In her own defense, O'Connor occasionally, good-humoredly, took aim at the critics who linked her with the southern school of writers. In the contribution that she made for The Living Novel, her satirical nature tackled the problem of the southern writer:

6 Covington, op. cit., p. x.
None has ever made plain just what the southern school is or which writers belong to it. Sometimes, when it is most respectable, it seems to mean the little group of Agrarians that flourished at Vanderbilt in the Twenties; but more often the term conjures up an image of Gothic monstrosities and the idea of preoccupation with everything deformed and grotesque. Most of us are considered, I believe, to be unhappy combinations of Poe and Erskine Caldwell. Terms, such as gothic and grotesque, had become in O'Connor's opinion "critical cliches that don't mean anything." That critical confusion about her region displeased her, and at times, in order to assert her independence from the cliches, she declared that she would have written in the same manner if she had lived outside the south. But in other instances, recognizing the importance of the south, she defended it as "the most favorable spot" for a writer of religious purpose. The pattern is one of commitment and rebellion for O'Connor who as an artist herself bound in many unconscious ways to a literary tradition, but who was insistent that she spoke outside that tradition as well. T. S. Eliot's analysis of the role of the individual talent to the part of tradition is a close analogy to the problem that O'Connor found herself confronted with; the body of writing shares a continuity with past literature and yet, in that stream, creates its own individuality.

Because of the pressure exerted on O'Connor in 1960, she made an attempt at defining one of those "critical cliches" that was so often directed at southern writing and in particular, her writing—the term "grotesque". In a lecture delivered at Wesleyan College, she made a distinction between the conscious creation of the grotesque and the

---

misreading that northern readers were often guilty of—what she termed the abuse of calling anything that came out of the South grotesque.

The purpose of this paper will be, through the contents of that lecture and the body of O'Connor's writings themselves, to indicate a definition and manner of the grotesque. It will be assumed that the grotesque is a genre and as such, a philosophy will rest behind it which in turn will be responsible for elements of technique. At points, the definition will touch upon the literature of other writers, some southern, but they will not be considered because of geographical region. They will be included because they have accepted the element of the "grotesque" as a part of their writing.

A literary creation begins with a writer's vision, with the particular manner in which he chooses or is able to view life. For such an author as Henry James, the vision was to render "the look of things, the look that conveys their meanings, to catch the color, the relief, the expression, the surface, the substance of the human spectacle." That belief, as to the purpose of art, when accepted meant concrete implications towards the technique of James' fiction.

The writer of the grotesque, says O'Connor, realizes and believes in the existence of the mysterious or the metaphysical. Sociology and psychology can give explanations up to a point but beyond this stage, the writer recognizes the birth of the undefinable, of faith, and the mysteries of creation. From O'Connor's stance, Dreiser's indictment of evangelism is without

---

validity then; it does not recognize the existence of needs beyond the economic, which do not lie in the nature of man to explain fully.

In O'Connor the mysterious is religion; in a writer such as Carson McCullers, it is the wonder of the individual at himself and at life. Frankie in Member of a Wedding moves into adulthood never able to catalogue life, aware of her painful separation, and at times she becomes engulfed by the terror and the wonder of her emotions. There is an air of the sacred about the human being that can not quite be explained by psychology. The major, in Reflections in a Golden Eye, can not understand his hatred nor his attraction for the private; none of the relationships are touched with the caustic weapon of psychoanalysis. The women of Faulkner's novels and even the Snopes clan possess this quality. There is power behind these individuals, a gift of nature. The Snopes power can not be explained solely in terms of economics just as their ambition nor their shrewdness can. The writer of the grotesque respects the element of mystery within life. But if he chooses not to attempt to explain this element, how does he include it in his fiction?

He explores the concrete and makes it his means. The transcendentalists suggested in the nineteenth century that the visible world was a means of reaching the "over-soul." Nature presented man, with the proper depth of vision, symbols to read; he must study the object realizing that its many qualities were valuable clues to understanding. The writer of the grotesque will not take this method; he will make the concrete more drastic than it appears normally. He must distort. "Henry James said that Conrad in his fiction did things in the way that took the most doing; I think the writer
of grotesque fiction probably takes the least." The writer of the grotesque is not seeking full knowledge of the mysterious; he does not wish to analyze it, merely to make its existence known. Strangely enough the theatre of the absurd has followed the same path.

Ionesco in formulating his concept of the theatre has spoken of the necessity for distortion in terms of language:

We live in a world that has lost its metaphysical dimension, and therefore all mystery. But to restore the sense of mystery we must learn to see the most commonplace in full horror. To feel the absurdity of the commonplace, and our language.

The artist works in opposition to his audience; the commonplace is the norm for the reader; the shape and substance of it familiar to him. The writer sees what he believes to be abnormal but it is his vision, not his reader's. The situations in Nathanael West's Miss Lonelyhearts and The Day of the Locust would not be disturbing if the writer had not recognized that adulation of the movie world and the acceptance of suffering had become part of our lives, and raised the intensity of those conditions to the nightmare.

In the introduction to McCullers' Reflections in a Golden Eye, Tennessee Williams carries on an imaginary conversation with a critic of the "gothic" writers:

'But you know you still haven't explained why these writers have to write about crazy people doing terrible things!!'


"You are objecting to their choice of externals!"
"Externals?"
"Of course, Art is made out of symbols."
"Then why have they got to use such...?"
"Symbols of the grotesque and the violent?"
"Because a book is short and a man's life is long."
"That I don't understand."
"Think it over."
"You mean it's got to be more concentrated."
"Exactly the awfulness has got to be compressed."

Distortion can work for the artist; Tennessee Williams' drama is a prime example of how it can. Life isn't like Williams' drama, readers protest; the characters verge on one extreme or another. Stanley in Street Car Named Desire is a brute force that simply doesn't exist; Blanche, a delicate sensibility, that is too fragile. But the exaggeration serves to dramatize the extent of the conflict between the romantic and the crude reality that Williams felt intensely. Distortion, a means of expressing it, rids his drama of any element not relevant to the vision.

"There is a lack of an audience who believes in Jesus Christ," O'Connor said in one of her interviews. And because of this, the job of the Christian writer will be a difficult one. He will find, O'Connor pointed out, distortions which are unpleasant in modern life. He will have to draw large figures for the blind, shout for the deaf. Ionesco's statements about exaggeration contain implications that O'Connor would not have subscribed to but they agree, at least, on an initial point—that if the metaphysical level is ever to be reached, it must be through exaggeration.

---


Ionesco's method means an absence of any reference beyond the immediate world; the theatre of the absurd buries its audience in the reality and stupidities of the concrete until they threaten the existence of living forms. Rhinoceros after rhinoceros invades a town until the last individual begins to contemplate becoming one himself in Ionesco's play. Language is turned upon itself; it is incoherent; it is false because society has made it so. And the writers of the absurd theatre expose it to critical bombardment. But an object, often frightening in nature, becomes a working symbol for the force of conformity in the drama. But Ionesco in order to make the object serve him must replace its natural environment; instead of roaming the jungle, the animal appears in the midst of the town; gradually its number grows through the conversion of the townspeople.

O'Connor's method of the grotesque can be found in the characterization of Hulga in her short story "Good Country People." Hulga has a wooden leg which allows her to be complete physically. Because she has it, she is able to move about and is independent to a degree. Later in the short story, Hulga believing she is about to seduce an ignorant Bible salesman removes her leg; the removal suddenly, because of conversation proceeding it, means more than her lack of mobility. She is stripped through its removal of her pseudo-intellectualism and is helpless; earlier she had professed atheism, but in the Bible salesman she encounters real evil and disbelief and the face of it is something she is incapable of facing. "Her brain seemed to have stopped thinking altogether and to be
about some other function that it was not very good at.\textsuperscript{13} The leg assumes the burden of a deeper meaning in the latter part of the short story. It becomes a means for bringing a moment of religious insight. In "Parker's Back," another short story, the central character, Parker, has for years been collecting tatoos. His wife is religious and disapproves but she is tolerant of his vanities, until Parker has an accident on a tractor in the fields and becomes convinced that he must have one more tattoo done on his back. Although Parker isn't religious, he chooses a Byzantine Christ for his back. Once there, the eyes of the Christ burn through him as if he carries the real Christ. The sensation is unpleasant. The idea of an adult covering his body almost completely with tattoos is odd, but the grotesque act comes when he demands the Byzantine Christ, with its strange frightening eyes, be drawn on his back. The tattoo moves from the secular level to the level of symbolization.

"When you write fiction," O'Connor said in an interview in Jubilee, "you both reveal and obscure the things you know best."\textsuperscript{14} The tattoo in "Parker's Back" is a concrete image that helps O'Connor move to a higher level of meaning, one that both obscures and reveals.

The latter part of the story operates under a mood of mystery. "The eyes that were now forever on his back were eyes to be obeyed. He was as certain of it as he had ever been of anything."\textsuperscript{15} It is necessary that the


tattoo be specific in the early part of the story. O'Connor describes Parker's fascination and his acquisition of each tattoo. But it is not necessary in the latter part of the story that the object remain in the realm of her reader's understanding. O'Connor stated it in this manner:

I write a novel in which the central action is a baptism, which for the majority of my readers, is a meaningless rite. I have to imbue this action with an awe and terror which will suggest its awful mystery. I have to distort the look of the thing in order to represent as I see them, both the mystery and the fact. 16

The Catholic writer or any religious writer, will fail in his attempt if he does not begin with the concrete. Abstraction is not sufficient for his task. "Fiction, made according to its own laws, is an antidote to such a tendency, for it renews our knowledge that we live in the mystery. The concrete is the writer's medium." 17

This belief not only brings into existence such symbols as the sideshow freak, the peacock, the bull, the forest, the misfit, and the wooden leg in O'Connor's fiction, but it affects the plots of her fiction. Her fiction moves in speed and intensity on two different levels: the earlier part of the stories in which she is concerned with the concrete, differ greatly from the endings. A division, created by her methods, separates her fiction.

Irving Malin has noted this characteristic, calling the earlier part of her fiction the grotesque and pre-Christian; he designates the latter

sections as Christian. His observation is appropriate but he fails to recognize O'Connor's preparation for the second part. Although there is a division in her fiction, it is never so sharp as to be "tacked on;" however startling it is. The pattern of her fiction is one of development and then quick, even violent resolution. Vital changes or action occur very near the end of her stories and usually assumes the form of a revelation or a moment of grace. Tarwater near the end of *The Violent Bear It Away* drowns Bishop, is assaulted by a perverted man, and assumes his prophetic mission; in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," the violent slaughter of an entire family is delayed until the last couple of pages where there is a lack of action. The realization of the characters, such as Mrs. Shortley, Mr. Head or Mr. Fortune, assumes the force of a violent act in its intensity.

These two areas of concern make necessary, if not two different techniques, at least a change in the beginning technique of the writer. Faulkner does not attempt to combine the different elements within his structure; the mood of Addie Bundren in *As I Lay Dying* is separated into individual chapters away from the meanness of her husband and the ludicrous journey of her own body. The pain and isolation of the lonely woman stand in contrast to the action but Faulkner does not risk loss of characterization by involvement. O'Connor's fiction attempts to reconcile different moods and characters. Because it does so, the look of the fiction "is going to be wild."18

Jonathan Baumbach has noted that the characters of Flannery O'Connor hold discussions as if "they were on split-screen television a thousand miles apart." Characters in her fiction are posed as opposites. The son in *Everything That Rises Must Converge* considers himself an enlightened modern intellectual; his mother is a vain woman who clings to dead traditions. Mr. Fortune, in "A View of the Woods," forms a battle line between himself and the other members of his family with the exception of Mary Ann. Tarwater's struggle in *The Violent Bear It Away* is against (1) the prophetic mission that his grandfather tries to impose upon him and (2) the sterile, confusing intellectualism of Rayber. The characters can not communicate with each other; they are driven by purposes and motives that create wide gulfs between their states of consciousness. A conversation between Mrs. Flood and Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood* illustrates the radical opposition of O'Connor's characters:

"What's that wire around you for? It's not natural," she repeated.
After a second he began to button his shirt. "It's natural," he said.
"Well, it's not normal. It's like one of them gory stories, it's something people have quit doing—like boiling in oil or being a saint or walling up cats," she said.
"There's no reason for it. People have quit doing it."
"They ain't quit doing it as long as I'm doing it," he said.
"People have quit doing it," she repeated. "What do you do it for?"
"I'm not clean," he said.
"I know it," she said after a minute, "you got blood on that night shirt...."

Two visions are in conflict within the passage. Mrs. Flood sees literally; "Unclean" is physical to her. She can not understand why an individual should continue to do something that everyone else has ceased to do. At the end of the novel, O'Connor describes Mrs. Flood as feeling cheated; Hazel, though she is blind, has insight into some limitless world; all she can see is a pin-point of light. As much as she wishes, to understand Hazel, she can not. The distance between them is too great. The response created by the encounter of the two is a humorous one. The passage quoted relies on the interpretation of a metaphorical statement in literal terms for its humor. It is the principle of two comedians, one holding a pie and the other saying "Give it to me." The pie is then slammed into his face.

There is a basic pattern to O'Connor's characterization, which serves to establish contrast. Generally, she juxtaposes humorous character such as Mrs. Pritchard in "A Circle in the Fire" who relishes the opportunity to discuss physical ailments alongside a more serious character, intense in nature and often suffering from some religious deficiency (as does Mrs. Cope in the same story). The pattern of incongruity results in humor, often light satirical comedy that tends to become blacker as the story progresses. The nature of evil or grace is often illuminated in the heat of that fiery comedy.

O'Connor in estimating the value of the South to the writer of grotesque believed the southerner is still able to recognize evil. The fundamentalist faith has made religion real for the southerner; it is always at his heels making him aware of his fallen state and the tremendous seriousness of salvation as a means toward grace. Man occupies two countries in O'Connor's view. One
is the country which he inhabits physically, where he may or may not be working strenuously towards redemption, and the other is God's country, where man is often a stranger. The strange terrain of this country frightens the individual. "The South's preoccupation was with guilt, not with innocence, with the reality of evil, not with the dream of perfection," C. Van Woodward has said of the southerner's sense of reality.\(^{21}\)

O'Connor was a Roman Catholic but she chose as her subject southern Protestantism for which she possessed a genuine admiration. Protestants confront evil head-on, something which the American in his genteel church society has ceased to do perhaps. "I believe," O'Connor said, "that a person is always valuable and always responsible."\(^{22}\) She saw the implicit dangers in a society that chose to live by ethics cut off from tenderness of God. "Its logical outcome is terror. It ends in forced labor camps and in the fumes of the gas chamber."\(^{23}\)

Her belief in Jesus Christ was strong as is natural to the creed of her religion. He is the immovable force that her characters collide with for he makes the realization of man's nature necessary. "If he did what he did, there's nothing to do but lay down your life and follow him," the Misfit says in "A Good Man is Hard to Find."\(^{24}\) But there are other possibilities even if


\(^{23}\)Ibid.

man has to invent them. There is the road of defense that Hazel Motes
chooses for himself; he may refuse to believe, may establish the "Church
Without Christ" in a valiant, sometimes foolish battle against faith. Or
he may assume virtue without belief as Rayber does in The Violent Bear It
Away. Such acts are only escape routes; they do not change the facts. But
through them, man cuts himself off from the mainstream of energy and becomes
fragmented, a grotesque. Man finds belief difficult either because of his
own nature or the state of disbelief around him.

During the later years of O'Connor's life, she was fond of reading the
writings of the Roman Catholic priest Teilhard de Chardin, and recommended
his Phenomenon of Man for a journal in the sixties as the most significant
reading she had done. The title for her short story "Everything That Rises
Must Converge" was taken from one of Teilhard de Chardin's books. There are
subtle connections between O'Connor's faith and that of the Jesuit priest.

Chardin, influenced by the writings of Bergson, evolved during his life
time a concept of evolution that he felt reconciled the religious view point
with the scientific. The world has evolved to the point where a rich variety
exists, but through the consciousness of the individual unity may be obtained.
The evolution of the "cosmic stuff" has been matched by the evolution of man's
consciousness. Radically opposed elements exist along side each other, but
with the proper perspective the differences are recognized, and unity is found.
"Let us emphasize the point; union can only increase through an increase in
consciousness, that is to say vision," Chardin wrote in The Phenomenon of Man.
The state of consciousness itself is responsible for the evolution of man. "We are evolution," Chardin states.25

O'Connor's title story, "Everything That Rises," is at first glance critical of such optimism as expressed by Chardin's theory. Julian's mother is firmly convinced of her superiority over the Negro people. The son's spiteful acts that present her with embarrassing situations finally are responsible for her break-down; at the end of the story, she reverts to the past where Julian does not exist. She can not adjust to the world where a Negro woman may be disdainful of a gift of pennies for her son. In another short story within the collection, Mrs. Turpin, a woman who prides herself on her religious character, encounters a young girl in the waiting room of a doctor's office. After hearing Mrs. Turpin talk for a while, she attacks her calling her a "wart-hog." Later at home, Mrs. Turpin has a startling vision of what the day of resurrection would be like. "There were hoards of souls rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs."26 This is scarcely Chardin's view of enlightened humanity moving towards a unity through consciousness. "However, a purely affirmative vision can not be demanded of him (the writer) without limiting his freedom to observe what man has done with the things of God," O'Connor said.27 Perhaps, as much

as she believed in the rightness of Chardin's vision, she saw that it was not so; the nature of man's heart often was the stumbling block to such unity.

But what she did share with Chardin was a belief in the state of consciousness, both as an artist and as a religious person, and the necessity of reading the concrete. In the conclusion of her lecture on the grotesque, O'Connor said, "The problem of such a novelist (the novelist of the grotesque) will be to know how far he can distort without destroying and in order not to destroy he will have to reach those underground springs which will give rank to his work."26

Thematically as well as technically, the form of O'Connor's fiction is determined by her consciousness or vision. Chardin in his theory emphasizes the need for recognition of the qualities of the particular, unity without loss of the individual quality. He, as well, saw that this concrete world was to be recognized as a means towards symbolism even if the writer had to re-shape, or distort its appearance.

Significantly, the fourth reason O'Connor gives as a cause for the abundant numbers of grotesque writers in the South is that the South possesses a large number of good writers. Each writer, if he is a good writer, forces those that follow him to a more intense method. If the territory has been explored before, the young writer finds himself faced with the problem of how to excel the older writer. "The presence of Faulkner alone," Flannery O'Connor said "makes a great difference in what a writer can and can not permit himself to do. Nobody wants his mule and wagon stalled on the same tracks that the Dixie Limited is roaring down."29 A good number of the newer southern writers, however, have found

26 Ibid., p. 279.
29 Ibid., p. 276.
themselves stalled there, either unconsciously on their part or through the
efforts of literary critics. Obvious links between the technique of
William Faulkner and Styron can be found, and it will take time for Styron to
move from under the shadow of Faulkner.

The South has contributed to literature a raw type of characterization,
humor often physical and depending upon exaggeration, and a manner of writing
that reveals the state of inner consciousness. But the gifts that southern
writing have presented to the writer have made him cautious. He does not want
to sound like Faulkner. If he does, he will be subjected to the criticism of
being just another one of the school of southern writers. The vision must
deepen if he is to avoid this end. The writer will be forced to a deeper sense
of reality where former use of language and technique will not suffice. As
Ionesco said: "For if the essence of theatre lay in the enlargement of effects,
it was necessary to enlarge them even more, to underline them."\textsuperscript{30}

O'Conoir's view is supported, in part, by the writings of those authors who
have been termed writers of the "grotesque". There is a progression inherent in
the works of Faulkner, Capote, and McCullers when arranged chronologically. The
grotesque and comical element in Faulkner composes only one part of his fiction;
often, this element is used to emphasize another tone within his work and is
submerged within the philosophical voice of the main body of his work. The
chapter about Benjie in \textit{The Sound and the Fury} illustrates how the grotesque is
handled in Faulkner's fiction. In the writings of Capote and McCullers, the
discriminating, rational voice of Faulkner disappears and the grotesque characters

\textsuperscript{30}Esslin, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 91.
are left isolated. Humor occurs infrequently. In O'Connor, humor comes to the foreground, working lightly and then bitterly, and the characters are stripped to their quirks and act accordingly. Well-rounded characters such as Faulkner's lawyers simply do not exist.

The task of the writer, in O'Connor's view, implies a moral responsibility. "One old lady wouldn't be so bad, but you multiply her two hundred fifty thousand times and what you get is a book club," O'Connor said in her lecture.\(^1\) Although the modern reader, may ask for comfort and perhaps earnestly need it, the function of the writer is not to give it to him. "I would hate to see the day when the southern writer would satisfy the tired reader."\(^2\) The writer of the grotesque will make a tremendous effort to dislocate man and startle him into a broader vision.

The contents of this lecture, as disjointed and varying in comment as it is, is perhaps the most acute analysis that has been made of the purpose and nature of O'Connor's work, both of which she included under the term grotesque. "The difference between her work and that of her gifted contemporaries lies in the nature and the causes of their freakishness," Caroline Gordon has said in an attempt to distinguish her work from Capote and McCullers.\(^3\) Certainly, these are the most distinguishing elements and any attempt to divide O'Connor from the purpose she most laboriously outlined would be foolhardy. She holds a vision that insists on man's "grotesqueness" because he has cut himself off from God.

\(^{1}\)O'Connor, *Added Dimension*, op. cit., p. 278.

\(^{2}\)Ibid., p. 279.

The method in O'Connor's fiction is a means of presenting this vision. Loosely, O'Connor has stated her method in her lecture and her fiction bears it out in exactness.

O'Connor has stated that the writer of the grotesque will seek to reconcile discrepancies or incongruities. What this means is as William O'Connor has stated in his definition of the grotesque: a lack of distinction between comedy and tragedy. It means the use of a satirical comedy, bordering on the edge of black comedy at times and at others lightly exposing human elements to criticism. Only a minority of the critics and scholars dealing with O'Connor's fiction have recognized that humor is a functional and necessary element in her writing. In turn, the humor affects the characterization, pace, and language of O'Connor's writing.

The writer of the grotesque will move towards poetry, O'Connor believed. Symbolism as she has pointed out is vital to the writer and he will resort to characters and landscape for this symbolism. Symbolism itself involves an element of distortion. O'Connor often called herself a writer of romances like Hawthorne. When she did so, it was to the element of symbolism that she referred to. Hawthorne had spoken in his preface to The House of Seven Gables of the liberties that the writer of romances "chose to take with reality." Similarly, O'Connor speaks of the need to distort. This belief appears in the majority of her fiction through the form of symbolism.

Because of the nature of the grotesque, O'Connor's fiction contains a large amount of violence. It aligns itself with humor and insight or revelation.

---

"I can not conceive of a story that does not end in death," O'Connor stated. 35 The use of grotesque elements seems to push a writer to the point where he must employ violent acts. But violence is never a gratuitous element in O'Connor's fiction: it serves its function in relation to the grotesque.

These three elements, humor, violence, and symbolism, are in part responsible for and a result of the "grotesque" as defined by O'Connor, and they are worthy of consideration as they appear in the context of her work. The fact must be kept in mind that the term "grotesque" is one that contains at least two levels of meaning. The first meaning, that which suggests only deformity, is the narrower of the two; the definition that will be used within this paper is the one which O'Connor herself has given.

35 Mullins, op. cit., p. 33.
CHAPTER TWO: THE COMIC TRADITION

For centuries, theories of comedy have noted that the material of comedy itself is never joyous. At the base of comedy is a serious note or simply physical discomfort. Laughter occurs when man has learned to deal with pain. "Laughter is never man's first impulse: he cries first," Walter Kerr writes in *Comedy and Tragedy*. The nature of comedy is "the groan made gay".36

Isn't America the most fascinating country in the world? Where else would I have to ride on the back of the bus, have a choice of going to the worst schools, eating in the worst restaurants, living in the worst neighborhoods and average six thousand dollars a week just talking about it.37

This negro comedian's routine is funny only because he has realized the basic incongruity of the situation and reached a level of perspective where he may view it as such. There is an element in the nature of comedy, however, that insists on the presence of pain or important matters. Groucho Marx has commented upon this in his distinction between an amateur and a professional comedian:

An amateur thinks it's funny if you dress a man as an old lady, put him in a wheelchair, give it a push that sends it spinning down a slope toward a stone wall. For a professional, it's got to be a real old lady.38


37 Ibid.

38 Ibid., p. 16.
"The best comedy makes no waivers," Walter Kerr has said. "It is so. And it is harsh."39

As a southerner, Flannery O'Connor was heir to a tradition of humor firmly rooted in the use of violence and a sometimes cruel, physical comedy. Weaknesses of the body, often taking the form of the grotesque or deformed, were important elements in southwestern humor. The alignment of humor with the grotesque is not a new combination as Friedrich Durrenmatt seems to suppose in his statement that "comedy and the grotesque" have been created in this century.40 Southwestern humorists discovered the combination early and used it as a basis for their humor.

The distorted individual appears frequently in the tales of the southwestern humorist. One of Sut Lovingood's adventures centers around a bride who on her wedding night removes her hair, teeth, and finally her leg. In a burlesque scene by Johnson J. Hooper, Uncle Kit sends a prospective suitor of Miss Winny's sprawling on the floor:

Ike fell backward over Master Thomas Jefferson Naron; and as his leg bare and unstrapped flew up, nearly at right angles with his body while its fellow, held quietly by leather and cassimere lay rigid on the floor, an uproarious shout of laughter at the grotesque spectacle shook the whole house.41

39 Ibid.
Acts of violence were also a part of southwestern humor. In "Taking the Census" by Hooper, hot water is poured on a dog to stop its howling. In another story, Sut Lovingood sets a lizard loose in a church meeting and in "Silicy Burns's Wedding", he releases bees among the bridal couple and their guests.

These characteristics of southwestern humor are present in O'Connor's work. Hulga, the one-legged girl, in "Good Country People" is a creation similar to those in southwestern humor and is undone in that manner typical of it. Lucynell, the idiot girl of "The Life You Save" whose distinction lies in her ability to say "bu-r-rd," is again a grotesque who is responsible for light humor at moments. Violence is also present in O'Connor's writing but, unlike that in southwestern humor, it is not a means to laughter. It stands in isolation from the humor, adding to the sting of the humor but it is not a direct cause. Occasionally O'Connor will exhibit comedy that is reminiscent of southwestern humor as she does in The Violent Bear It Away where a truant officer appears at the home of Mason Tarwater to inquire why the young boy has not been attending school:

"Oh you boy!" the old man shouted.
In a few minutes Tarwater appeared from around the side of the house. His eyes were open but not well-focused.
His head rolled uncontrollably on his slack shoulders and his tongue lolled in his open mouth.
"He ain't bright," the old man said, "but he's a mighty fine boy. He knows to come when you call him."
"Yes," the truant officer said, "well yes it might be better to leave him in peace."
"I don't know. He might take to schooling," the old man said.
"He hain't had a fit going on two months."*2

*2O'Connor, Three op. cit., p. 313.
Earlier when Tarwater gives his nephew instructions about his death, he discusses the possibility of rolling his body to his grave while sitting in his coffin for measurement. There is a note of burlesque to the scenes that suggest southwestern humorists, William Faulkner, or Mark Twain.

There are, of course, important differences between O'Connor and southwestern humorists. Rarely does O'Connor employ the grotesque or the malformed individual as a source for her humor as southwestern humorists did. In an O'Connor story, the grotesque character is a source of respect and mystery. In "The Temple of the Holy Ghost," it is the freak that is recognized as the vessel of God.

Generally, her humor springs from characterization rather than incidents although there are occasional comic situations. Although the major pattern of her comedy is one deriving from characterization, even this point must be qualified.

The Violent Bear It Away has been compared by some critics with Huckleberry Finn but the only unity between the two is that they are both novels of initiation. Both are considered as comic novels but the method of humor creates a wide division between them. The viewpoint of Huckleberry Finn is first person; that of The Violent Bear It Away is third person. The distinction is an elementary one but it allows Twain to create a character who can be a progenitor of comedy or stand naively and allow Jim and Tom Sawyer to be humorous.

Both Tarwater and Huck are outsiders. Huck is the noncivilized individual who is always rejecting civilization. Similarly, Tarwater is a foreigner to the

---

\(^{43}\) Ibid., p. 352.
modern world. A telephone becomes a startling object for Tarwater early in
the novel when Meeks the salesman persuades him to call his uncle. "It don't
talk," Tarwater tells the salesman and he behaves as if he, "were afraid that
the Lord might be about to speak to him over the machine." During dinner,
he looks up at his uncle and asks (upon seeing a hearing aid): "What you
wired for? Does your head light up?" In moments, O'Conner's satire is
directed at Tarwater; in others, at the society that is strange to him. He
is not a comic character in these moments; he is able through the familiar to
entertain a vision or a sense of connection with the spiritual:

The horn of the machine dropped out of Tarwater's hand,
He stood there blankly as if he had received a revelation
that he could not yet decipher. He seemed to have been
stunned by some deep internal blow that had not yet
made its way to the surface.

But in Tarwater's reluctance to accept his role or vocation, he is a source for
satire and comedy. In registering for a hotel room with Rayber after his own
name, he writes in bold letters NOT HIS SON.

Although the humor in Clemens's novel serves to characterize Huck, there
is an air of relaxation about the character that O'Conner's structure does not
allow. Huck also views the familiar and finds it strange but he is not an
obsessed character as Tarwater is. There is in Huck Finn a sense that he too
is aware of humor, that in his dead-panned expression there is a recognition of
the silly. No such scene occurs as that in Huck Finn when Huck describes the
drawings of Emmeline Grangerford, all of which repeat the image of death in
The Violent Bear It Away.

43Ibid., p. 352
44Ibid., p. 366.
45Ibid., p. 352
Everybody was sorry she died, because she had laid out a whole lot more of those pictures to do, and a body could see by what she had done what they had lost. But I reckoned that with her disposition she was having a better time in the graveyard.46

The tone is one of mock innocence but the absurdity of the situation is felt; we recognize the presence of an individual who is capable of seeing as well as creating laughter.

Any attempt to evaluate the humor of an artist is difficult; the writer is not likely to employ only one type of humor. Satirical comedy and more traditional types of comedy appear alongside each other in O'Connor's fiction. Even her emphasis on the use of humor itself varies in her two novels and her short stories. The Violent Bear It Away, written after Wise Blood, contains less humor than her earlier novel and short stories. The short story form itself seems to be the form most favorable to her humor.

In the end, humor is an intellectual form. Comedy forces the reader outside the area of character identification. Judgement rather than sympathy is the more likely response in comedy. Humor also affects the potentials of characterization; a comic creation must move, if credible, is able to evoke only certain responses. The chief function of O'Connor's humor is two-fold. Through the satirical nature of the comedy, O'Connor punctures our vision by holding it up to ridicule, and it interacts with the horrible to create a dramatic sense of the "grotesque" or the strange.

Unlike the southwestern humorists, O'Connor deliberately tips the balance between the comical and the horrible. "In the nineteenth century, there was

a good deal of grotesque literature, which came from the frontier and was supposed to be funny, but our present grotesque characters, comic as they are, are at least not primarily comic.47 The short story "A Good Man is Hard to Find" is an example of the discord that O'Connor creates between the humorous and the non-humorous. The story begins with the efforts of a grandmother to persuade her son to vacation in Tennessee rather than in Florida. The opening tone is one of light humor. The grandmother bickers with the children and warns them of the Misfit, an escaped convict who has been reported to be in the area. She hopes through this piece of information to change their minds:

"Yes and what would you do if this fellow, the Misfit, caught you?" the grandmother asked.
"I'd smack his face," John Wesley said.
"She wouldn't stay home for a million bucks," June Star said.
"All right, Miss," the grandmother said. "Just remember that when you want your hair curled," June Star said her hair was naturally curly.48

The "smack" of John Wesley is ridiculous against the magnitude of the name "Misfit"; the argument between June Star and the Grandmother, amusing because the grandmother does not uphold the dignity that her years should afford her by resorting to childish vindictiveness.

The next morning after the disagreement, the grandmother is the first person in the car carrying Pitty Sing, the cat, dressed in a navy blue dress with organdy trim because she wants everyone to know, if she has an accident, that she died a lady. She cautions Bailey that patrolmen hide behind billboards and small clumps of trees and spring on people before they have an opportunity

48O'Connor. Three. op. cit., p. 129.
to slow down. During the first part of the story, the grandmother is responsible for the humor and becomes fixed as a comic creation. As such, she awakens only this response. The pattern has been set in the beginning of the short story.

At Red Sammy's, the humor assumes a deeper intensity. The owner Red Sammy holds a discussion with the grandmother over the deplorable condition of mankind. The subject of the Misfit is brought up again assuming the fashion of a leitmotif; enough emphasis has been given to him that by this point the reader is certain that he will appear in the short story, but O'Connor waves off any complete consideration of this development through her treatment of the scene at Red Sammy's. Through satire, she means to explore the attitudes of the modern individual. June Star does her tap routine on the dance floor:

"Ain't she cute?" Red Sammy's wife asked leaning over the counter. "Would you like to come and be my little girl?"

"No, I certainly wouldn't," June Star said. "I wouldn't live in a place like this for a million bucks," and she ran back to the table.

"Ain't she cute?" the woman repeated, stretching her mouth politely. 49

Red Sammy's wife declares her estimate of the human race:

"It isn't a soul in this world that you can trust," she said. "And I don't count nobody out of that, not nobody," she repeated looking at Red Sammy. 50

The frankness of the child and the wife's strained courtesy are amusing but they reveal the pettiness of both characters.

49 Ibid., p. 133.
50 Ibid.
Through crafty manipulation of the children, the grandmother forces Bailey to take a side road to visit a plantation that she had seen when younger. Just as the car leaves the road and hits a ditch, she realizes that the plantation was in Georgia not Tennessee. In order to escape condemnation, she cries out that she has injured herself.

At this point, the Misfit appears and a change occurs in the tone of the story. The response has been a conditioned one before; the characters have performed certain roles. Bailey has been the victim of the bickering, suffering silently in his yellow parrot shirt; the mother, a nonentity except as a symbol for motherhood with her kerchief, bottles, and a newly arrived baby. June Star and John Wesley have performed the roles of spoiled children to the grandmother's dramatic burlesque act.

With the introduction of the Misfit, the scene should suddenly assume a note of seriousness but it does not. The family does not immediately recognize the seriousness of their condition nor who the Misfit is. They continue as before. Only Bailey seems to grasp the terror of their condition: "We're in a terrible predicament! Nobody realizes what this is."51 But the characters can not seem to make the transition; their reactions, now set in this environment, seem hopelessly foolish.

After recognizing the Misfit, the grandmother pleads: "You wouldn't shoot an old lady, would you?"52 Removing a handkerchief from her cuff, she begins to dab at her eyes. The act is insincere, recalling the burlesque
pretension at injury earlier. The character is still comical and although the situation retains the basic framework for humor (the incongruity of her words against the condition), free laughter does not occur. The reader, however, is capable of understanding the seriousness of the situation even if the characters can not.

The terror increases as Bailey and the children are gradually taken into the forest by the Misfit's men. Reason ceases to function. The Misfit attempts conversation; becoming embarrassed, he fumbles for words, "Ain't a cloud in the sky," he remarks looking up at it, "Don't see no sun but don't see no cloud either." It is the type of conversation that strangers make and in another situation would be funny. The scene is deliberately posed to create that reaction but O'Connor does not let us forget that within a few feet people are being killed. We are prepared to laugh but then reminded that this is not humorous. The Misfit apologizes for not wearing a shirt in front of the ladies. A minute later, he sends the mother into the woods to be slaughtered. The incongruity is too sharp for laughter.

Near the end of the story with only the grandmother alive, the comedy or at least the form of comedy is stilled altogether. The terror has reached its final intensity. In a conversation with the grandmother, the Misfit tells her that Jesus threw everything off balance and expresses a wish to know if Jesus really lived. If he knew this, he says he could relieve his doubt.

53Ibid., p. 138.
As he finishes, his voice cracks and in a moment of compassion, the grandmother calls out: "Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children." The Misfit then fires three shots at her. The only moment of character realization comes in the last paragraph of the story and it ends with that one statement of recognition and passion. What the grandmother realizes can be speculated upon in a fairly logical manner. Because of the Misfit's agony, she experiences Christian love but O'Connor does not extend the moment. It is a revelation and she preserves its mystery.

The ending of the story is stark but O'Connor has nowhere else to go. The Misfit can not reverse his action and accept compassion; compassion is, indeed, the cause for the quickness of the grandmother's death. Christian values are part of that which the Misfit rebels against. Because O'Connor has denied normal characterization and has created stylized characters which she satirically exposes, violence is at this point the only justified end. As well, the violence adds a sterness to O'Connor's vision. "She would have been a good woman if there had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life," the Misfit tells Bobby Lee. As Thomas Merton has said of O'Connor, she was able to understand that those who think themselves "good" are in their own way "grotesque". The light only has to be turned to the proper angle to understand the nature of their grotesqueness. "Who is a good man? Where is he?" He is hard to find. Meanwhile you will have to make

54 Ibid., p. 143.
55 Ibid., p. 143.
out with a bad one who is so respectable that he is horrible, so horrible that he is funny."\textsuperscript{56}

The humor in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" serves to satirize those "good" people and to bring them to a point where they look grotesque. Religion, as practiced by the grandmother, has no meaning or validity in a world peopled by the Misfit's, who if wrongly, are confronting the issues head-on. In the vision that O'Connor attributes to her audience, the Misfit is the "grotesque" character, but her distortion serves to create reality. True religion implies that goodness is a thing under construction, that if the Misfit is a freak, he is no more distorted than those who profess religion but on their own terms, estranged from the reality of God. Humor is structurally a means of presenting this vision.

Brainard Cheney has commented upon this dual quality of O'Connor's humor: "She has invented a new form of humor. At least, I have encountered it nowhere else in literature. This invention consists in her introducing her story with a familiar surface in an action that seems secular, and in a secular tone of satire or humor."\textsuperscript{57} The situation then becomes naturalistic and her theme moves to the level of the metaphysical according to Cheney. This pattern is borne out in her fiction.

In O'Connor's short story "A Circle in the Fire," Mrs. Pritchard is a comic type. She delights in gossip and disasters. Mrs. Cope, her employer,


is a pious woman who expects disaster daily but protects herself through prayer. Between the two visions, humor is created and as a result, the true nature of each is revealed. In a backyard conversation between the two, Mrs. Pritchard tells Mrs. Cope of the woman who has died during childbirth in an iron lung:

"I don't see how she had it in it," she went on in her normal tone. Mrs. Cope was bent over, digging fiercely at the nutgrass again. "We have a lot to be thankful for," she said. "Everyday you should say a prayer of thanksgiving. Do you do that?"

"Yes'm," Mrs. Pritchard said. "See she was in four months before she even got that way. Look like to me if I was in one of them, I would leave off... how do you reckon (sic)....?" Everyday I say a prayer of thanksgiving (sic)..." "I know if I was in an iron lung there would be some things I wouldn't do," Mrs. Pritchard said scratching her ankle.58

Each continues in her own train of thought. Mrs. Cope's piety is given little serious ground against the backdrop of Mrs. Pritchard's speculations.

With the arrival of the boys, the short story begins to assume a deeper tone. There is a mysterious, threatening quality to their presence but the humor does not slacken. It now continues against the background of impending danger. At a crucial point in the story, Mrs. Cope returns from the kitchen and finds Garfield stretched out in the hammock smoking. He discards the cigarette:

just as Mrs. Cope came around the corner of the house with a plate of crackers. She stopped instantly as if a snake had been slung in her path. "Ashfield," she said, "please pick that up. I'm afraid of fires." "Gawfield!" the little boy shouted indignantly. "Gawfield!" 59

---

59 Ibid., pp. 220-221.
The presence of fire is threatening, so much so that in the mind of Mrs. Cope her fear is transferred to the landscape about her. The sun itself seems to be her enemy. The dangerous quality of the boys continues to develop as the story continues, but at this point, the ludicrous "Gawfield" for "Garfield" is responsible for intense humor.

Mrs. Cope herself is exposed to critical examination in her conversations with the boys. Mrs. Pritchard from the beginning has no illusions about these boys; she is willing to believe the worse and then magnify that. But Mrs. Cope believes herself to be religious and her understanding is that people are to be thought of as good. She has no real knowledge of evil.

Garfield tells Mrs. Cope that Powell looked his little brother up in a box and set fire to it. Mrs. Cope's response is "I'm sure Powell wouldn't do such a thing."60 The empty expression is repeated again when one of the boys repeat Powell's statement about riding.

Mrs. Cope's chief fault lies in the possessive attitude she has towards the woods. She lacks any unselfishness and humility. At one point enraged by her daughter's dress, she cries: "Sometimes I look at you and want to cry. Sometimes you look like you might belong to Mrs. Pritchard."61

Throughout the story, Mrs. Pritchard is delighted when events begin to darken. Hopefully Mrs. Cope comments after ordering the boys off the farm that everything is quiet now. Mrs. Pritchard's response is that she expects them to strike after dark. Around the character of Mrs. Pritchard is developed

60 Ibid., p. 223.
61 Ibid., p. 229
a lighter satirical humor than that directed towards Mrs. Cope. O'Connor uses her throughout as a restorer of comedy: "Mrs. Pritchard came sour-humored, because she didn't have anything calamitous to report." She deplores an anticlimax so she speculates verbally on the violent means the boys will finally resort to. As a character, she is both humorous and a means of constantly reminding the reader of the possibility of danger.

Again the ending in the story parallels that of a "A Good Man is Hard to Find." The woods are set afire and Mrs. Cope is suddenly confronted with a violent realization which O'Connor describes only as a face of misery that might "have belonged to anybody, to a Negro, or a European or to Powell himself." It is the face of the dispossessed people, those who have been evicted from a land or the face of God. Powell and the boys regain their place through destruction and violence.

As Brainard Cheney has pointed out in his article, the story is secular to a point. Through satire, O'Connor exposes Mrs. Cope as a character. But as the story progresses, the humor becomes more caustic and O'Connor moves to a point where her concern is a religious one.

Perhaps the significance of O'Connor's total method can be understood better if some speculations are made. The initial question must be, "What is it that is grotesque about the story?" It is not the fact that the woods are set afire by a group of boys just as the grotesque is not the death of a family in "A Good Man is Hard to Find." The reasons behind the characters' actions are not so common, however. But even these could be presented in a

---

62 Ibid.
63 Ibid., p. 232.
manner that would not be so startling. The answer lies in the combination of the different elements of O'Connor's fiction.

The reader is prepared for the violent endings of O'Connor's stories. The beginning contains the germ of the later violence. The reader is, however, uncertain of the moment that it will occur. O'Connor distracts his attention for a while through her humor then leads him into a situation where comedy and horror merge.

Nathanael West employed this method of strengthening the sense of horror by aligning it with the ludicrous. One of the letters to Miss Lonelyhearts illustrates this procedure:

I am sixteen years old and I don't know what to do and would appreciate it if you would tell me what to do. When I was a little girl it was not so bad because I got used to the kids on the block making fun of me, but now I would like to have boy friends like the other girls and go out on saturday nites, but no boy will take me because I was born without a nose.

In the short section, West builds a pathetic image in the first two sentences. However, the last lines tip the balance of the section: the absence of a nose is ludicrous. The response to the passage is not a sense of tragedy but it is not quite one of laughter either. The vision is one that estimates life as comic pathos. Unlike traditional comedy, West and O'Connor's humor does not remove the pain of existence by finding a means of survival through laughter. Humor is, instead, a method of driving sharper spears into the nature of reality.

West repeats his method in Miss Lonelyhearts in the characterization of the woman who, forced into pregnancy by her husband, suffers kidney disease;

the idiot child who is raped and lets her brother listen to her stomach to
determine if she is pregnant; and the wife, tormented by her husband, who
lifts the covers on her bed and finds him posed with his hands ready to choke
her or who later hides behind curtains and jumps out on her. In each
situation, the basic incongruity exists and it is this element that is
responsible for our feeling of horror.

The nature of humor insists that a certain balance be maintained. When
this balance is violated, the result is obvious. The Grangerford instance
in Huckleberry Finn is an example of a writer abandoning the comical procedure.
The murder of the two boys is seemingly too brutal for Twain to handle; the
light nature of the book suddenly becomes dark and horrible. If the writer
can retain perspective, as O'Connor and West do, he can sharpen the intensity
of feeling. Asbury returns home in "The Enduring Chill" to die melodramatically
as the wasted bitter creative spirit only to discover he is suffering from
undulant fever and will not die, at least not in the near future. The ending
is highly ironical. In perhaps one of O'Connor's most startling stories "A
View of the Woods," Mr. Fortune kills his grandchild during a souffle in the
woods. This occurs after a highly humorous verbal combat between the two.

The endings of O'Connor's stories vary at times. Often the satirical
comedy is present in a story but it does not emphasize the horror of the ending.
The violent element is subliminated to a level of unimportance as far as response
is concerned. The sense of horror is strong in "A Good Man is Hard to Find"
and "A Circle in the Fire," but in other stories by O'Connor, neither the
characters nor the reader responds to the act of violence. The method in these
stories is one of presenting the act of violence and then switching for further satire to a view-point not directly concerned with the action of the story. In the story "Comforts of Home," O'Connor describes the shooting of the mother in this manner:

Thomas fired. The blast was like a sound meant to bring an end to the evil in the world. Thomas heard it as a sound that would shatter the laughter of sluts.  

At the end of this sentence, O'Connor centers her attention upon the arrival of Farebrother, the sheriff whose name in itself is an ironical note on the part of O'Connor. He estimates the scene viewing it in the nature of a headline:

The sheriff knew a nasty bit when he saw it. He was accustomed to enter upon scenes that were not as bad as he hoped to find them, but this one had met his expectations.

Little emphasis is given to the murder itself; attention is distracted by this last comment by a man who relishes an unpleasant situation. Violence becomes the catalyst that moves a character to a position where we may view him satirically. A vision is created which induces awareness of what has happened and why; with the introduction of another view-point such as Farebrother's or the view of Mrs. Hopewell or Mrs. Freeman in "Good Country People," misinterpretation occurs. The nature of these people's views is comical but behind the laughter, O'Connor is working towards a serious purpose. Often, it is an extension of the satire of the secular view that she deals with in the early part of the story.

65 O'Connor, Everything That Rises Must Converge, op. cit., p. 141.
66 Ibid.
Hazel Mote's death in *Wise Blood* is treated in this manner. Hazel's landlady asks the police to search for Hazel after he leaves her boarding house. They find him in a ditch:

"Yonder he is," the first one said and pointed into the ditch. The other one moved up closer and looked out the window too.
"His suit ain't blue," he said.
"yes, it is blue," the first one said.
They got out and walked around the car and squatted down on the edge of the ditch. They both had on tall new boots and new policeman's clothes.
"It might have uster been blue," the fatter one admitted.
"You reckon he's daid?" the first one asked.
"No, he ain't daid. He's moving." 

The comic routine continues while Hazel lies in the ditch injured. After Hazel's conversion, O'Connor has two choices opened to her as a writer. She may continue with a sympathetic characterization of Hazel or, as she does here, continue with her humor but she can no longer focus on Hazel. The psychology of the scene is the same as that of being confronted with an automobile crash where near-by a clown is doing his routine. The humor of the scene relies on the seriousness of Hazel's condition, but it prevents any direct concern with Hazel.

O'Connor's fiction depends upon over-lapping elements. Characters move in separate directions never really communicating; emotional responses over-lap. O'Connor's satire is levied on her central characters (who are always through attitude or physical appearance, out-siders) and the people about them. There is a double edge to it. Through the grotesque character, she is able to reveal the strange nature of accepted beliefs. A scene between

Sabbath Hawks and Hazel illustrates this technique:

"How could you be a bastard when he blinded himself?"
he started again.
(Sabbath has mentioned earlier that she once wrote
to a lovelorn columnist)
"Dear Mary, I am a bastard and a bastard shall not
enter the kingdom of heaven as we all know, but I
have this personality that makes the boys follow me.
Do you think I should neck or not? I shall not enter
the kingdom of heaven so I don't see what difference
it makes."

"Listen here," Hazel said, "if he blinded himself how.."

"Then she answered my letter in the paper. She said 'Dear
Sabbath, light necking is acceptable but I think your
real problem is one of adjustment to the modern world.
Perhaps you ought to re-examine your religious values
to see if they meet your needs in the world...."58

Hazel deals with facts; the lovelorn suggests that if Sabbath's religion
does not fit her situation to alter it. The attitude that O'Connor wishes
to attack is the proposition that man can reshape religion. Hazel is defeated
in his attempt. At the ending of Wise Blood, he is at odds with his setting
as much as he was in the beginning. O'Connor increases this estrangement
by satirizing the landlady's vision of Hazel. Solemnity could add nothing
significant at this point to O'Connor's novel but laughter, through recognition,
can move the reader into the position where he can recognize "grotesqueness;"
ot of Hazel Motes who fills his shoes with glass, but of the landlady who
raises his rent when she discovers his money and who can only respond blindly
to his actions. Humor in O'Connor's fiction serves to create a sense of the
grotesque and to illuminate its nature.

58 Ibid., p. 67.
CHAPTER THREE: SYMBOLISM AND VIOLENCE

Symbolism in O'Connor's fiction is in many instances embodied within the grotesque and, in fact, the supposition may be made that in order to work on the level of symbolism, O'Connor is forced to the position of the grotesque. Her comment upon the nature of the rite of baptism indicates the problem that she felt she faced in regard to language: "If I write a novel in which the central action is a baptism, I know that for a large percentage of my readers, baptism is a meaningless rite; therefore, I have to imbue this action with an awe or terror." If symbolism has come to be interpreted largely in terms of Freudian psychology, as scholars have pointed out, and the symbolism of baptism and other metaphysical terms have lost their larger reference in this century, O'Connor's fiction suggests restoring their value through exaggeration and the context of the symbol. The conventional symbols are not disregarded but intensified or placed in a context that will reveal their symbolic nature to an audience that, if not hostile, has at least ceased to find these symbols per se to be meaningful.

The pattern that has been suggested as existing in the major portion of O'Connor's fiction in regard to her structure is strangely enough present in her use of symbols. "I have the notion that a symbol is sort of like the engine in the story that is taking on more and more meaning," O'Connor has said. In discussing the story "Good Country People," she points out that at the end of the story the Bible salesman is stealing a great deal more than

69O'Connor, Added Dimension, op. cit., p. 255.
70Ibid., p. 259.
a leg but she emphasizes that symbolism is progressive. The symbol in her fiction rests within a concrete fact and in the process of her fiction this element moves to a level of symbolism.

The concept that O'Connor treats in her short story "The Lame Shall Enter First" offers a good point from which to begin a consideration of symbolism within her fiction. As the title itself suggests, the theme of the story is the Christian belief that the weak and the mangled are of first consideration in the eyes of God. One of the central characters in the story, Rufus Johnson is an orphan except for his religiously bent grandfather. Rufus has been in trouble with the police and more significantly, has a club foot. Sheppard, the City Recreational Director, believes Rufus' misconduct stems from his handicap and begins efforts to reform the boy by bringing him into his home. The result is bitterly ironical and not at all the standard theme that might be expected. Rufus does not through Sheppard's understanding find a place within society.71

The most important working symbol in the story outside the area of characterization is the club foot of Rufus. O'Connor stresses its importance early in the story by giving it an existence independent of necessity of characterization. For Rufus and Sheppard, the foot assumes a level of meaning beyond its mere physical existence. In O'Connor's first description of the foot, she stresses its prominence: "He leaned back in his chair and lifted a monstrous club foot to his knee... The leather parted from it in one place

71 It might be pointed out at this stage that O'Connor's characters in their nature work on a level very close to symbolism.
and the end of an empty sock protruded like a grey tongue from a severed head. The description indicates the repulsive nature of Rufus' deformity, and as well affects the response to Rufus by attributing to him a stream of power; the club foot means in the simplest terms that as a character he is to be taken seriously. As the story progresses, Rufus begins to use this symbol or at least, to regard it in a manner that solidifies its symbolic nature. Sheppard notices that Rufus is very touchy about his foot as if he considers it to be a sacred object. Rufus and Sheppard make two visits to a brace shop to have a shoe fitted for the club foot. On the first trip, they are unable to pick up the shoe because it has been made too small for the boy. The conclusion that each character draws reveals his vision of the foot. Sheppard concludes that a mistake has been made in the measurement; Rufus, that his foot has grown.

After Sheppard has shown in several weak moments that he has no real trust in Rufus' honesty, the two visit the shop again. This time O'Connor is more detailed in her description of the shop:

Wheel chairs and walkers covered most of the floor. The walls were hung with every kind of crutch and brace. Artificial limbs were stacked on shelves, legs and arms and hands, claws and hooks, straps and human harnesses and unidentifiable instruments for unnamed deformities. After trying on the shoe and having his limb removed, Rufus rejects the shoe. This denial is the turning point of the story. Any belief in Sheppard's psychology or ability to reform the boy disappears. The club foot has served

72O'Connor, Everything That Rises Must Converge, op. cit., p. 149.
73Ibid., p. 175.
in the story as a means of objectively presenting evil; the deformity has placed Rufus outside society and made him menacing. He chooses to retain the club foot. By doing so, Rufus insists on the symbolic significance of the foot.

The growth of the foot means to Rufus that the deformity of his body parallels the state of his soul. It is an analogy not a cause of his evil. In a tense scene near the end of the story, Rufus shouts at Sheppard: "I lie and steal because I'm good at it. My foot don't have a thing to do with it."74 The size of the foot had increased in Rufus' mind earlier because his own wickedness had. O'Connor's final summation seems to be that Rufus' vision encompasses the equipment or the correct realization to deal with life. The deformity is preferable to the mechanical rationalizations that have been set up to deal with reality and the question of sin and salvation.

The process within O'Connor's fiction involves introducing a symbol which affects sensibility but does not lend itself to rational nor psychological interpretation. There is an excess, as there is with any symbol, that will not be fitted into the pattern of the story and, in fact, this element constitutes the definition of the symbol. It is at this point that O'Connor seems to differ most significantly from the other writers of the grotesque. Through exaggeration, she creates an element that arrests attention, as do the deformed characters of the other writers, but in doing so she creates symbolism, a further step which they do not take. McCullers' characters may represent in the traditional sense all mankind but this is extremely different from the concept involved in creating symbolism.

74 Ibid., p. 188.
The problem that O'Connor confronts in "The Lame Shall Enter First" is how to present evil objectively; to realize the extent of the problem that O'Connor faces, the attitude of the twentieth century would have to be probed. It is likely that a modern reader confronted with Rufus Johnson would not differ greatly in his approach of analysis from that approach which Sheppard takes. The twentieth century is the age of psychology. Law courts, social workers, and other community agencies lean away from punishment and towards attempts to understand the reasons behind people's behavior. The power of evil, in the terms of medieval thinking or even that of the Puritans in the United States, seems to have weakened under the revealing insights opened by psychology. As O'Connor pointed out in her introduction to A Memoir of Mary Ann: "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."  

For this reason, it is important that Rufus Johnson engage in evil not for compensation but because "he's good at it." The club foot becomes an indispensable symbol in her efforts to place Rufus in "Satan's hands." It is an indication of his depraved nature and yet, through his recognition of it as such, a means towards his salvation. The unrelenting satire which O'Connor levies on Sheppard's moral state, and his final betrayal of his son and complete inadequacy is the writer's evaluation of Sheppard's vision as juxtaposed with Rufus'. The grotesque aspect of Rufus' foot instead of repulsing him convinces him of his need and right to salvation. Unlike Alymer

---

in Hawthorne's story "The Birthmark," the imperfection is not shocking to Rufus. In terms of the freak in O'Connor's story "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," the refrain is "God made me thisaway...This is the way he wanted me to be and I ain't disputing his way." The foot and the freakish body are marks of "earthly imperfection" but they are the possessions of characters who realize that man is not a god or, as Rufus declares to Sheppard, "not Jesus Christ."

In The Violent Bear It Away, the force that initiates action and conflict is the mentally retarded son of Rayber, Bishop. He is an emotive force in the first portion of the novel unable to communicate or affect through language and reason. His presence is felt through his whimpering, his clumsiness, and his force as a grotesque. But through Rayber and Tarwater's responses to him, he begins to operate as a symbol, an embodiment of an idea, in the latter part of the story. The Misfit is another example of O'Connor's reliance upon physical exaggeration for a symbolic element.

In the introduction, it was suggested that O'Connor shared with the writers of absurd drama certain kindred purposes. Melvin J. Friedman has suggested in his article "Flannery O'Connor's Sacred Objects" an extension of the similarities between O'Connor and her contemporaries which in an oblique manner deals with her symbolism. The thesis of his article is that both O'Connor and absurd writers are interested in a literature of things, but for O'Connor things or objects are able to suggest the possibility of the "sacred". They may become, in fact, a source of spiritual insight, while retaining their original properties or essences. For support, Friedman

76 O'Connor, Three op. cit., p. 191.

quotes from Mircea Eliade’s The Sacred and the Profane: “A sacred stone remains a stone; apparently (or more precisely from the profane point of view)… but for those to whom a stone reveals itself as sacred, its immediate reality is transmuted into a supernatural reality.”

Eliade’s analysis is of the nature of symbolism; the dualism that he speaks of is expected of the symbolic element. But Friedman’s discussion is revealing at two points: (1) within O’Connor’s fiction exists an "uneasy tension" between the sacred and the profane and (2) that each employs its set of symbols.

Rufus sees "manifestations of the sacred" in his clubfoot; Sheppard, only a disgusting deformity that leads the boy into trouble. Hazel Motes’ views his automobile in Wise Blood as a means of escape from the religious commitment that hovers over it. Enoch, in the same novel finds a mummy, which the twentieth century man accepts as normal, a mysterious and overwhelming incarnation of the "new Jesus". In "A View of the Woods," Mr. Fortune after realizing Mary Fortune’s attachment to the woods stares at them unable to understand her feelings. "Everytime he saw the same thing: woods…—not a mountain, not a waterfall, just woods." Later in the short story, the woods become a source of a vision. "He saw it, in his hallucination, as if someone were wounded behind the woods and the trees were bathed in blood." The "thing" or the object is a source for spiritual insight or symbolic reading as Friedman suggests.

78 Ibid, p. 199.
79 O’Connor, Three. op. cit., p. 70.
80 Ibid., p. 71.
But Friedman does not continue his pursuit of the conflict in O'Connor's fiction between those who view religiously and those who see in terms of the profane. He believes it foolish to attempt any further comparison between O'Connor and her contemporaries and makes the supposition that her final concern with objects lies within the religious purpose, "with its clash between the sacred and the profane." The similarities of purpose in O'Connor's fiction and the drama of Beckett and Ionesco are striking ones; it is only in method of execution that the division between them grows. Each is confronted with an audience sharing a vision that the writer wishes to destroy. It has been pointed out that each employs laughter and the element of the grotesque. A comparison of the symbolism appearing in the three writers is revealing. They share at least in their symbolism an ability to evoke response through their symbols (for lack of a more precise term this must be called an emotional response). The swarms of rhinoceros that keep appearing in Ionesco's play can not be received coolly, realized as being a symbol and analyzed intellectually. The audience responds on this level as well but they have a force and being in their initial state just as Rufus' foot does or as do the woods and the sun in O'Connor's other stories.

But O'Connor's fiction rests upon the vision or point of view for much of the realization of symbolism. Characters who are unable to view except in terms of the profane are set in the territory of those who are able to see beyond the "pin-point" of light. Gradually, O'Connor through shock tactics

81 Friedman, The Added Dimension—op. cit., p. 197.
brings these characters to a point near the end of her fiction where they are able to see symbolically.

No better example of this paradox of insight exists than that in *The Violent Bear It Away*. Tarwater and the old man are outsiders, which means that they must view the city and the ways of urban people as mysterious. Rayber's hearing aid is a "tin box in which he thinks"; the telephone evokes a response of reverence from Tarwater. The angle of vision determines the manner in which they are seen. To Rayber, these objects are a normal part of man's achievements. They are a tribute to his abilities and skills. Tarwater's eyes work for O'Connor in the novel; he is the element by which she can explore reality and readjust our vision. Bishop as a symbol is an even more fruitful means of accomplishing this end. Without Tarwater's involvement and his response to Bishop, O'Connor's novel would seem less grotesque. The elements are there for a conventional novel. But Tarwater's response convinces the reader that Bishop is more than a retarded child who with proper care and help could lead a somewhat normal life.

The process is at work again in "The Artificial Nigger" in which a status of a negro on a lawn becomes a source of revelation to the boy and his grandfather. In itself, it is a familiar object but for these two, who have not been involved in an urban life, the object is a strange and forbidding thing. "They stood looking at the artificial nigger as if they were faced with some great mystery, some monument to another's victory."82

amazement brings the symbol to a point where it contains meaning for an audience accustomed to a profane view of it. Through the vision of her characters or through exaggeration (as occurs in "Good Country People" and "A Good Man is Hard to Find). O'Connor is seeking a method of symbolization by stressing the mystery of the object.

The exaggeration may come in terms of the physical, the individual who is malformed in some manner and whose deformity represents or symbolizes a more important element as does Hulga's wooden leg, the body of a freak, or the club foot of a young boy. Through the presence of the deformity, she can arrest attention and by the response of her characters indicate its symbolic nature. Or often O'Connor, through her own emphasis as a writer, can create a symbolic element by refusing to incorporate it and giving it often unexplainable force. This latter method is used in stories such as "Greenleaf" and "A View of the Woods".

The bull is the most emphatic symbol in "Greenleaf." The bull traditionally is a complex symbol serving in its function several different levels of meaning. It is a symbol of the earth, mother, the wetness principle and heaven and the father. In O'Connor's story, the bull can not be interpreted solely through reliance upon the past meanings of the symbol, Unlike some writers, O'Connor professed naivety of symbolism and its rich heritage. However, the bull as a symbol works within the traditional meaning. The bull is mentioned in the beginning of the short story. He awakens Mrs. May from

---

her sleep chewing on her hedges. "The bull, gaunt and long-legged, was standing about four feet from her, chewing calmly like an uncouth country suitor,"34 The bull belongs to the sons of Mrs. May's hired man, Greenleaf. The description of the bull is one that could as well have been applied to Mr. Greenleaf. The bull is ugly, worthless for breeding, and a destroyer; he poses a threat to the ordered world that Mrs. May has created single-handedly on her farm. Through Mrs. May's eyes, it is not surprising that the bull belongs to Greenleaf's sons. Greenleaf, like the bull, is a painful and trying fact that she must deal with.

The symbolism of the bull is gradually seen to be an extension of the problem that the characters face in relation to each other. Mrs. May's two sons, share with the bull masculinity, which accompanies the image of birth and strength. During the day, Mrs. May summons her courage to prevent Greenleaf from destroying her through his laziness and incompetence. The introduction of the bull into the story serves to dramatize her conflict and symbolize it. Although the bull is a reality, the problem of Mrs. May is more than just a bull let loose on her property. He is a more dramatic threat to her possession than the Greenleafs, but he is an analogy to them. It is during the night that Mrs. May's strength disappears and in her dreams, the force of the bull appears:

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

34 O'Connor, Everything That Rises Must Converge. op. cit., p. 25.
she stood watching it began to narrow and pale until it looked like a bullet. Then suddenly it burst through the tree line and raced down the hill toward her. She woke up with her hand over her mouth and the same noise, diminished but distinct in her ear. It was the bull munching under her window.

O'Connor has referred earlier in the story to the bull as an "uncouth country suitor" and later when he has gored Mrs. May, he looks as if he has come to "woo" her. These elements serve to identify the bull's masculine nature, but it seems erroneous to interpret the animal solely in these terms, or psychologically as Mrs. May's subconscious urge for a "lover". In the passage above, O'Connor's symbol of the sun is a completely metaphysical one. As Paul Tillich has stated in his discussions of religious symbolism, the sun is both a figurative idea and one that is transcendent: the sun serves as a symbol for the qualities of God and yet by being symbolic of God, much of its reference is to an idea that is beyond symbolism. What is symbolic in the nature of God that purifies man. The sun is "swollen" and "red" which suggests "fire" and in turn destruction. Then it narrows and pales, the final form of destruction. As the dream ends, Mrs. May awakens and O'Connor creates an analogy between the symbolism of the bull and the sun. The same noise continues although less over-whelming in the sound of the bull chewing outside her room.

In explanation for the reference to the bull's masculinity, Stanley Edgar Hyman has noted that O'Connor equates the mysteries of religion and sex. The Greenleafs are close to nature; they chose the land as their vocation unlike Mrs. May's sons who are scornful of farming. Although Mrs. May finds the

85 Ibid., p. 47.
Greenleafs despicable, she grudgingly admits that it is they that will be "quality" in a few years not her sons. Both the Greenleafs (the name in itself is suggestive) and the bull are the simplest expression of nature and God; although they are not educated or refined beings, they share a source of vitality that Mrs. Turpin in "Revelation" sees in the hogs that "pant with secret life." The Greenleafs and the bull share the masculine sex and through it, a communication with nature and consequently God.

Robert Drake has said of O'Connor's preoccupation with the grotesque: "For her (O'Connor), the Old Adam is still a pretty hairy creature. But ugliness, like vulgarity, for which she once observed she had a natural talent is often a sign of vitality. Ugliness was usually preferable to the disiccated decorum of death and damnation." It is to the force of these people that Mrs. May succumbs in the ending of "Greenleaf." The bull becomes a purely symbolic statement upon the force of God; He does not observe man's boundaries. The Greenleafs are spotted with taints of depravity as is natural in mankind, but the bull, although sharing similarities with them, is at this point in the story, a force cleansed of imperfection. O'Connor's method of description is significant at this point:

She stared at the violent streak bounding toward her as if she had no sense of distance, as if she could not decide at once what his intention was, and the bull had buried his head in her lap, like a wild tormented lover, before her expression changed. One of his horns sank until it pierced her heart and the other curved around her and held her in an unbreakable grip. She continued to stare straight ahead but the entire scene in front

of her had changed—the tree line was a dark wound in a world that was nothing but sky—and she had the look of a person whose sight had been suddenly restored but who finds the light unbearable.\footnote{O'Connor, \textit{Everything That Rises Must Converge}, op. cit., p. 52.}

What happens to Mrs. May in the ending of the story is a moment of religious insight. Through her death or moment of dying, her ordered and proud world comes to an end. The sun has driven itself into the trees as the bull has pierced her. Her vision of the world suddenly changes: "the tree line was a dark wound in a world that was nothing but sky."\footnote{Ibid.} The "wound" suggests suffering, the death of Christ, and obligation of Christ's death, and man's obligation to repent. "Nothing but sky" increases the boundaries of Mrs. May's from that of attempting to label a part of the world as "hers" to that of understanding the infinite boundaries of God's world and her small part in it.

The revelation is a result of an act of violence, as it is in the majority of O'Connor's stories. Flannery O'Connor reared in the tradition of Catholicism had as a basis for her religious experience a set of symbolic religious acts. Baptism and transubstantiation are symbolic acts that assume the force of reality. Vital symbolism, as the nature of religion requires and has offered for centuries, can unify a culture and give it direction. T. S. Eliot's later allegiance to the Anglican church in England involved the question of faith and the symbolic nature of religion; he embraced both as means for his salvation. Less important but just as distinctive, religious symbolism became a source of language for him. But what if this symbolism has lost its force or if the
audience has so changed its outlook that the symbol is no longer powerful? "If other ages have felt less," O'Connor has said, "They (other ages) saw more, even though they saw with the blind, prophetic, unsentimental eye of acceptance, which is to say, of faith." Or it may be that the particular symbolism of one religion is too confining in its nature to be meaningful to the general public. Whatever the cause, O'Connor's violent endings laden with symbolism and symbolic in themselves attempt to restore force to a "moment of grace." What O'Connor has as a Catholic is a rich background of symbolism and myths. The violence in the ending of "Greenleaf" results in
1. an emotional response to O'Connor's fiction which for the majority of her readers evokes the response of shock at her strange or grotesque fiction, or
2. a realization that the response is forceful but it is the force that should come with a moment of grace or conversion. The vision that comes to Mrs. May at the ending of "Greenleaf" denies the rightness of her entire manner of living. Therefore, it should be forceful.

The problem in dealing with the relationship of symbolism to the grotesque (again emphasizing only the element of exaggeration) is one of distinguishing between the exaggeration made necessary by symbolism and that which would be the result of the "grotesque." The object in becoming a symbol assumes an extra dimension of meaning. The rocking horse in D. H. Lawrence's "The Rocking Horse Winner" becomes a strange object through its symbolic nature; exaggeration can become necessary in the working function of a symbol.

90O'Connor, A Memoir to Mary Ann. op. cit., p. 16.
In "Greenleaf," Mrs. May's vision of the bull is a symbolic one. But the events of the story themselves might be arranged so that they would not seem so grotesque to the reader. A woman, who has battled with the elements and her sons to preserve her farm, is gored by a bull. At the moment of death, she realizes she has not seen reality. The point of the discussion is that no one element within O'Connor's fiction is responsible for the response of "grotesquerie" towards O'Connor, nor is the definition of the grotesque a result of one element within her fiction. Exaggeration of the grotesque through which she tries to embody the mystery of God, by revealing this nature as "vessels of God" is one means towards this symbolism. But they are never "gratuitous" grotesques or freaks. They are symbolic elements as Tennessee Williams has pointed out.

Paul Tillich in his discussion of the religious symbol has said: "For me the greatest religious utterances are those in which this type of non-symbolic speaking is more or less reached. But they are rather rare and must be rare, because our real situation is that of distance from God and not of God all in all."91 O'Connor's symbolism is born out of this vision of duality. The potential for symbolism is there, but modern man has failed to find it. The wider meaning of the grotesque is that which O'Connor established in her lecture; the writer of the grotesque will seek to combine discrepancies, incongruities. The religious symbol is created in opposition to the sense of reality embedded within a culture. In O'Connor's fiction, it is only at a point that an individual is able to see symbolically, and then this vision

is one that sets him at odds with his environment and former way of life.

Symbolism contributes to the total sense of the grotesque in O'Connor's fiction through its force and the violence that often surrounds it. And it is most definitely a Christian symbolism as Stanley Edgar Human has pointed out. The image of the bird on the wall of Asbury's room (in "An Enduring Chill"), is a recurring one, but O'Connor delays the impact until the final page of the story when Asbury learns that he has undulant fever. She has delivered her shock to the character. He is now opened to realization. Now the impact of the symbol delivers itself through Asbury's moment of insight.

The fierce bird which through the years of his childhood and the days of his illness had been poised over his head, waiting mysteriously, appeared all at once to be in motion. Asbury blanched and the last film of illusion was torn as if by a whirlwind from his eyes. He saw that for the rest of his days, frail, racked, but enduring, he would live in a purifying terror. A feeble cry, a last impossible protest escaped him. But the Holy Ghost, emblazoned in ice instead of fire, continued, implacable, to descend.92

Dramatically, through the sheer power of the symbol and O'Connor's preceding structural method, the revelation has a powerful impact. The symbolism of fire and murder in other O'Connor's stories attempt to make real and restore force to the acts of God. Fire, traditionally a symbol of destruction and cleansing, destroys the sins of pride and vanity in her short story "A Circle in the Fire." The child listened to the wild shrieks of joy "as if the prophets were dancing in the fiery furnace, in the circle the angel had cleared for them."93

93 O'Connor, Three. op. cit., p. 23.
The fire destroys pride and restores the sense of suffering, the one continuing link among all men. The peacock in "The Displaced Person" is a symbol of God's grace; the displaced person, of Christ's displacement upon mankind.

These symbols through their own nature and the landscape which O'Connor creates about them establishes a sense of violence and the grotesque. Their nature is fierce, as is O'Connor's view of religion, but it is unwise to interpret them without reference to their context. In it, they assume the force of presenting reality to characters. They reverse visions but it must be done so dramatically to emphasize the importance of what they symbolize and to clarify O'Connor's statement upon what is "grotesque" or distorted. Her symbolism breaks the pattern or reality; distant things, as O'Connor designates the spiritual, are brought into dramatic conflict, with the secular view of life, through symbolism. When distortion occurs either in her symbolic element or in the violent manner with which she chooses to shroud her symbol, it is for the purpose of revealing a "hidden truth." The validity of O'Connor's belief is not in question here, but it is the principle responsible for the technique of her fiction and the type of symbolism within her work lies within the total definition of the "grotesque."
BIBLIOGRAPHY


