

Good faith and flannery oconnor research paper example

[Experience](#), [Belief](#)



In her own way, Flannery O'Connor appears to have been notorious in literary circles for much the same reason as Tim Tebow's isolation within the National Football League: her zeal for her faith caused others to view her with more than a bit of superstition. Patricia Highsmith, author of *The Talented Mr. Ripley* and other novels, tells a story when O'Connor was describing a knot that had a resemblance to the face of Jesus. After that comparison, Highsmith decided that she did not like O'Connor (Vafidis, web). However, for those who know O'Connor principally through her fiction, her piety takes an odd journey to the surface of her narratives; instead, it is often the peccadilloes of O'Connor's descriptive process that make her writing stand out to her readers. The fact that O'Connor steadfastly denied that fiction should serve as a mirror to the soul or character of the author is perhaps a major factor in this. She wrote once that " Any story I reveal myself completely in will be a bad story" (Vafidis, web). In the fall of 2013, the prayer journal that O'Connor had kept entered publication, showing much more of her pious side. However, in her stories, religion often takes a pained and twisted path.

Consider the case of Hulga, the amputee who is also the protagonist in O'Connor's story " Good Country People." She is one of the intellectuals in O'Connor's pantheon of characters; in all cases in which an intellectual appears, that character learns that the faith that he or she has had in his or her own ability to control life is a deeply flawed belief. In Hulga's situation, she believes that if she simply works hard enough and persists in her faith, she will get what she wants out of life. The unfortunate consequence of that belief is that the world is not a place in which good and evil readily separate

from one another. Instead, it is a palette made up of different shades of gray, and so life becomes more a matter of deciding where one will live on the spectrum while accepting that purity is definitely a precious commodity in this plane.

Note Hulga's last name: "Hopewell." Her mother has inculcated in her the blandly optimism philosophy that bandies its way around the South to this day. Such oddly vague statements as "It takes all kinds to make the world" or "Everybody is different" (O'Connor, web) belong more on fortune cookies than in genuine missives of advice about life. However, Hulga is different to a point that her mother cannot accept. She has attained a doctorate in philosophy, which goes against Mrs. Hopewell's notion that girls should attend college and enjoy themselves. Also, the fact that Hulga surrendered the name "Joy" as a child, changing to Hulga, is (to her mother) an act of rebellion. The fact that Hulga only has one leg, thanks to a childhood hunting accident, is more of an embarrassment to her mother than anything else. In a final act of rebellion, Hulga asserts her own atheism, yelling to her mother "We are not our own light!" (O'Connor, web). In Hulga's view, humanity is all there is; there are no divinities and neither heaven nor hell awaiting us.

And so when con artist and Bible salesman Manley Pointer shows up selling the Holy Scriptures, the visit disturbs her mother vaguely but compels Hulga; their first conversation leads her to believe that "events of significance" have taken place that will have "profound implications." That evening, she is in bed speculating about conversations with Pointer that go well beyond the Biblical; she assumes that she has seduced him in some way. The next day, Pointer returns and gives her her first kiss; even though this experience

gives Hulga the strength to “ carry a packed trunk out of a burning house” (O’Connor, web), she also thinks that things remain “ a matter of the mind’s control” (O’Connor, web). Of course, when things move to the barn, she becomes quite wrong. The imagery in the story becomes intensely pink, a color that has associations with feelings and senses; the effect is to show that Hulga is slowly but inexorably losing her mastery of the situation. They go into the loft of the barn, and when Hulga’s glasses keep them from kissing as closely as they want, Pointer takes them off and stores them in a pocket. This symbolizes Hulga’s inability to perceive what is coming. As matters progress, Pointer demands that Hulga say that she loves him. This begrudging assent is not enough, though, as he then asks her to show him where her prosthetic leg meets her body. The fact that she feels “ as sensitive about her artificial leg as a peacock is about his tail” (O’Connor, web) is not enough; it is Pointer’s observation that the leg somehow causes her to differ from everyone else that causes her to show him all of her; however, she wrongly decides that she is “ face to face with real innocence” (O’Connor, web). Now that she has removed her leg for a man, she feels that she is “ entirely dependent on him” (O’Connor, web).

Pointer does not carry his cruelty to full expression by raping Hulga, though. Instead, he places the wooden leg out of reach, getting out some whiskey and some pornographic images on playing cards. When she asks for the leg back, he refuses and pushes her back into place when she tries to get to it. She tells him “ You’re a fine Christian! You’re just like them all - say one thing and do another” (O’Connor, web), in order to shame him into giving her leg back. However, he shocks her by telling her that he does not believe.

Instead, he climbs down out of the loft, carrying her leg. He reveals his sociopathic tendencies by telling her that he has gotten other “souvenirs,” such as a glass eye, by manipulating people just like he manipulated her – he preyed on her difference. He even takes away her pride in her mind by saying, “You ain’t so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born” (O’Connor, web).

The religious transformation that takes place within Hulga is the most surprising element of the story. She looks through a chink in the barn wall to see Pointer walking off in the distance, a “blue figure struggling successfully over the green speckled lake” (O’Connor, web). The image of a person walking on water necessarily evokes an allusion to Jesus; the fact that Pointer is also the person who has taken what was most precious to Hulga (her leg, but also the pride that came with being the only person to manipulate the leg) and has also wrecked her sense of pride in her intellect and her ability to control situations is problematic, as most renderings of Christ would not involve this sort of cruelty. Hulga feels a new sense of humility as a result of her encounter; however, grace has come in a way that most traditional Christians would find bewildering to read. In the New Testament, of course, Jesus acted in ways that bewildered the existing religious establishment. He healed the infirm on the Sabbath, when the leadership thought he should be honoring God by resting; he turned over the tables in the Temple where people exchanged money for the currency that was only good for the purchase of items for sacrifice; he offered forgiveness of sins when it was thought that only God the Father could do that. In all of these instances, he changed expectations radically; it is this radical shift of

expectations that appears in O'Connor's representations of faith as well. The importance of humility in faith also appears in "A Good Man is Hard to Find." The old woman remains honest and humble up to the end of her conversation with the serial killer. She says, "If you would pray, Jesus would help you" (O'Connor, web), and the man agrees. However, it is the woman's last act of kindness that leads the killer to shoot her in the chest. Afterward, his eyes are "red-rimmed and pale and defenseless" (O'Connor, web). The use of polysyndeton in that list of adjectives shows the power of each one and the inner loss he feels with the absence of compassion - an absence that he brought upon himself willingly.

The road to faith is a deeply personal one, and each of us experiences it differently. The tortuous travels that souls take in the stories of Flannery O'Connor, though, show that her own path is just as transformative as the loss of a leg and requires as much surrender as taking the bullet of a serial killer.

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