

Why flannery
o'connor uses
violence to represent
grace: analysis of
"revelation," ...



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At first glance, Flannery O'Connor's work seems to begin and end with despair. In many of her works, she paradoxically uses styles that are grotesque and brutal to illustrate themes of grace and self-actualization. The use of violence returns her character to reality and prepares them for grace. Violence is a part of a relentless - at times terrifying - grace that hounds her characters. She shows violence similar to that of which threw Saul from his horse and blinded him, and, the same grace that drove the disciples to the ends of the earth where they suffered horrifying deaths. This suffering and violence is not just an unfortunate reality that sometimes confronts Christians, but is an integral part of what it means to encounter Christ. Although disturbing, O'Connor's anagogical paradox is an effective literary technique, deepening the meaning of her stories so that the proud are humbled, the ignorant are enlightened and the wise are shown the wisdom of the world is foolishness.

Sin is a disease that every person has, but we are often unaware of the extent of how it has metastasized. As it is found in the book of Genesis, the first sin that caused the fall of humanity was a pride, a true spiritual sickness. It is a sin that tricks people into believing that they themselves are a God-level person, stating that they wish for their will to be done, rather than the will of God. An obsession causing a love of power and exercising their own will, as well as having control. The way for the prideful to gain humility is for them to be spiritually healed. For Mrs. Turpin, this spiritual healing of her pride takes place in a Doctor's waiting room, which is symbolic of how one attends church to meet with God and have their sins forgiven.

Through the description of Mrs. Turpin as " very large" she " made [the

waiting room] look even smaller by her presence" (488), we can conclude that her pride has given her a controlling presence, and she assumes that she has power over the other people in the waiting room. This power causes her to place judgments on these people as we see she has " sized up the seating situation". O'Connor uses the character of Mary Grace to show Mrs. Turpin a revelation and as the name suggests, receives God's grace. As we see through this character, eyes are truly the window to the soul and through seeing into Mrs. Turpin's soul she is able to show her this grace. She is the only character in this story to have anagogical vision, though we see Mrs. Turpin starting to see the spiritual meanings of things later on. This is come on by a revelation, fittingly the title of the story, which is an event that forces one to see, forces Mrs. Turpin to see her pride as sin and the spiritual meaning in the world. Later there is a scene where Mary Grace is looking through Mrs. Turpin, showing her ability to see into Mrs. Turpin's soul.

Mrs. Turpin cannot see anything behind her, only vague figures, meaning she is blind to her own sin. We also see that Mary's " eyes seemed lit all of a sudden with a peculiar light, and unnatural light like night road signs give", showing her anagogical vision. The reference of Mary Grace's eyes as road signs represents a sign or a path that Mrs. Turpin needs to take. Since Mary Grace has anagogical vision, she sees that Mrs. Turpin needs to take the path of humility and is trying to urge her to see this. In a later scene, we see another description of Mary Grace's eyes being " fixed like two drills on Mrs. Turpin". This reference to a drill means that Mary Grace is pressing for Mrs. Turpin to get rid of the shell of pride she has, since a drill is used to break through a hard surface, trying to get to what is beneath it. With her eyes

saying " This time there was no mistaking that there was something urgent behind them" we can see that Mary is urgently trying to get Mrs. Turpin to take a look at herself and the things she believes in.

Once Mary Grace attacks Mrs, Turpin, she realizes that the girls eyes " seemed a much lighter blue than before, as if a door that had been tightly closed behind them was now open to admit light and air." Mrs. Turpin is about to open a door on her own belief system and look at herself in a different light. It is through the vision she has at the end of the story that she realizes she has been wrong in what she believes in and it is through knowing that she was wrong that Mrs. Turpin receives grace. When taking a look at the word choice O'Connor used, we can see why she chose the color blue to describe Mary Grace's eye, since Mary the mother of Jesus is also represented by this color and is also a symbol of Grace since it is through her that Jesus was able to come to earth and provide grace for all sinners. The attack by Mary Grace is a public humiliation for Mrs. Turpin which allows her to be publicly humbled. The aftermath of this revelation shows to have a humbling effect on Mrs. Turpin. She is starting to become more like Mary Grace with anagogic vision as we see " her eyes began to burn" just as Mary Grace's eyes were described to " smolder and blaze" which was a fire to purify Mrs. Turpin's sins, but now she is starting to realize these sins. This is significant, because before Mrs. Turpin's eyes were full of pride, but now that they are being compared to Mary Grace's eyes, we see that her eyes now burn with something other than pride. We also see that she " does not bother to lace" the shoes, where shoes used to be what she used to base her judgement of others off of. Now with her not worrying about the appearance

of her own shoes shows that she does not worry about judgements from other people, and shows her humility. "Here lower lip protruded dangerously" can be seen as a reference to both Mary Grace and the pigs. Being compared to a pig is a sign of humility, since in this story the pigs are referred to as lowly and fallen human nature.

As Mrs. Turpin has a revelation where she sees herself, Claud, and those of equal socioeconomic status bringing up the rear of the procession of Heaven, she realizes that she is just like the pigs and needs to become more humble, showing her pride abating. She sends a prayer to God, saying "Put that bottom rail on top. There'll still be a top and bottom" (507). She challenges God to put her on the bottom, referencing Matthew 20: 16, "So the last will be first, and the first will be last." She is starting to understand that to have anagogical vision, one cannot place themselves first, but lower themselves to the place of a servant and allow for all to receive honor before themselves. At the end of the story, we see that "the sun was behind the wood, very red," showing that it was setting. The sun is a parallel to the son of God, with the wood resembling the cross and red the blood and death, showing that the sun setting is a reference to the son dying. The death of Jesus was the ultimate example of grace, with him being sent to save all sinners from our sins. The presence of Christ's redemptive love was a sacrifice to the world. This is why she got another chance, because through the violence of Christ's death we are able to have grace and are given the opportunity to have second chances.

Through the story Greenleaf, O'Connor portrays a story of God's grace as she used the bull as a representation of Jesus and its death the sacrifice He

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made for man. Mrs. May is not a likable character, but O'Connor always uses disturbing, unlikeable characters to shatter our complacency and show the grace of God. Mrs. Greenleaf is similar to Mary Grace in being the only person in the story to have anagogic vision, where Mrs. May is similar to Mrs. Turpin, cannot see anagogically. She can see "indistinct grays and greens... through the window" which shows that she has some vision, but is anagogically blind. Similar to Mrs. Turpin, we see her become spiritually healed through the words "gaily", "rest", and "closed her eyes" where she is getting her happiness from nature (330, 332). Nature helps to show forth God's beauty as an example of his creation, being the representation of His grace. Through the use of a piercing metaphor "The light outside was not so bright but she was conscious that the sun was directly on top of her head, like a silver bullet ready to drop into her brain" we see that Mrs. May instinctively shies away from the light of the sun, the grace of God. This story shows us that grace is an encounter with God that saves us from our spiritual sickness, which in Mrs. May's case is her pride. Having control means that you choose self over God's hand in nature, where nature is the passageway of grace. What is most ironic about this is that the first time Mrs. May is aware of the bull is when she is asleep, which is when we lack control. As the bull is charging toward her it is described to be "gay" and "overjoyed" showing that it is wooing her, calling to her when her will is suspended, similar to how God woos his children. Perhaps the most evident example of grace in this story is the reference to the chalice that wine is served in for communion, which represents the spilt blood of Christ that is the reason for our salvation. Directly before Mrs. May's death "she had the look of a person whose sight has been suddenly restored but who finds the light unbearable"

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showing that she was given anagogical vision (333). In order to save Mrs. May, the bull must die and serve as a sacrifice, which shows how the sacrifice that Jesus made was the ultimate example of grace.

In the story *The Lame Shall Enter First*, O'Connor uses the grotesque to literalize metaphors, that has been discovered to have been a major theme in many of her works. This story can be hard for the reader to understand, because Sheppard is portrayed as the antagonist, but is written in our own language. He is a reflection of ourselves, but we see that no one in O'Connor's stories is beyond redemption, including ourselves, believing that in God all things are possible. O'Connor shows us the grace in evil, through the way that Rufus is closer to salvation than Sheppard because of his awareness to evil. Rufus is the symbol of sacrifice, through the description of red, the symbol of the blood of Christ, and through his proclamation that "nobody can save [him] but Jesus" (474). His statement "The lame shall enter first!" that inspired the title is an act of grace to Sheppard, calling him to humble himself (480). Rufus is one of the representations of anagogical vision as we see him "gaze beyond him" (450). Norton has one anagogic eye as he looked "toward the outer rim" (445). The telescope that Norton is enamored by is another symbol for anagogical vision, because it provides him with faith. Through this O'Connor teaches that it is only too late if one does not have anagogical vision, which inspires faith. The telescope inspired faith in the boy, which allowed him to be with his mother again. We see that through the anagogical vision there is hope for Rufus Johnson, and can hope that Sheppard can also find anagogical vision, so that he may experience redemption.

Through modern and postmodern literature it is difficult, almost impossible, to convey the moral force of the gospel. O'Connor is an author who knows that the violent or grotesque is a necessary tool for shocking readers out of their complacent, easy, and socially acceptable religion. She once wrote, "Writers who see by the light of their Christian faith will have, in these times, the sharpest eye for the grotesque, for the perverse, and for the unacceptable. To the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures." A gunshot is a much more mild form of death than crucifixion but, in *A Good Man is Hard to Find* it shocks our almost-blind culture. A prosthetic leg and a monkey suit are not nearly as absurd as the idea of a God who is at once fully divine and fully human but these elements are just strange enough to grab our attention. O'Connor's violence, like much of the violence in scripture, serves to drive characters close to their purpose. This is incomprehensible to our fearful and privileged culture. But, the violence in her stories is at the service of grace, because it brings purpose and awareness. Reading O'Connor's works shocks us, but this allows us the possibility to be able to understand the shocking nature of the Jesus story and what it means for our lives.

O'Connor's stories may not have the common fairy tale endings, but neither do the stories in the new testament. Christ does not call us to earthly happiness; he calls us to suffering and death and resurrection. He calls us to join him in his triumph. The pathway there can be joyful but not always neat or pleasant. As Jesus said, "The Kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent bear it away." The opportunity to be apart of the Kingdom of Heaven is the most extravagant form of grace one could receive.

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