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The Convergence of Grace and Nature: Flannery O'Connor's Catholic Imagination

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THE CONVERGENCE OF GRACE AND NATURE: FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S CATHOLIC IMAGINATION

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Abstract

This thesis explores Flannery O'Connor's Catholic imagination throughout her fiction, incorporating close readings of O'Connor's short stories with her letters, essays, and prayer journal. The thesis also draws comparisons between O'Connor's work and that of Graham Greene and Elizabeth Bishop to explore O'Connor's unique perspective and style. O'Connor's fiction flows from her Thomistic theology concerning the relationship between grace and nature, which she emphasizes throughout her writing. The first chapter presents a close reading of Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair* paired with O'Connor's "Greenleaf" and Benedict XVI's *Deus Caristas Est* to argue that *eros* is fundamentally Christian. Greene and O'Connor explore how God, the Divine Lover, desires complete intimacy with His beloved. The second chapter emphasizes O'Connor's use of eye and vision motifs to explore a spiritual awareness of mystery in "Good Country People." O'Connor uses the grotesque to illustrate the short-sightedness of modern nihilism and atheism. The third chapter uses O'Connor's only explicitly Catholic story to unpack the sacramental imagination that is both temporal and transcendent. O'Connor's bold metaphor of an intersex person and the Eucharist simultaneously simplifies and complicates the mystery of the Incarnation. The closing chapter examines the difference between the dialectical imagination at work in Bishop's "The Moose" and O'Connor's anagogical imagination in "Revelation" to illuminate O'Connor's distinctly Catholic approach to fiction, one that emphasizes the inevitable convergence of the physical and spiritual realities.

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Introduction

Many of Flannery O'Connor's readers are familiar with her response to Mary McCarthy's comment on the Eucharist as a "pretty good" symbol: "Well, if it's a symbol, to hell with it." While O'Connor's bold response mirrors her writing style, this statement more importantly reveals the central truth that O'Connor weaves throughout her fiction. In a letter to Cecil Dawkins, dated June 19, 1957, Flannery O'Connor wrote, "…[the standard of judgement] concerns specifically Christ and the Incarnation, the fact that there has been a unique intervention in history…It is the fact of the Word made flesh" (*HB* 227). Throughout her letters and essays, O'Connor repeatedly emphasizes the relationship between the physical and spiritual realities, which are present in the Incarnation, the moment God became man, and the Eucharist, the presence of God in the form of bread. O'Connor called her belief in the Incarnation "the fulcrum that lifts my particular stories" (227). "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," the title short story in the 1955 collection and arguably O'Connor's most well-known story, and "Greenleaf," a less popular but nonetheless powerful text, each present O'Connor's craft for unveiling the mystery of the unseen through the material world. Rooted in Flannery O'Connor's Catholic identity and unwavering belief in the Eucharist, O'Connor's fiction incarnates the sacramental reality of the world through stories that are both very real and deeply symbolic.

While O'Connor grew up in the Protestant South, her belief in the Incarnation was heavily developed and influenced by the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, especially the *Summa Theologica*. The self-proclaimed "hillbilly Thomist" infuses Aquinas's theology into her stories, especially concerning the interplay between the concrete world and the

spiritual world. Aquinas is famously quoted as saying, “Grace does not destroy nature or set it aside; rather grace always perfects nature” (qtd. in Brown). O’Connor addresses this role of grace and the process of perfection in the realities of everyday experiences. She wrote to Dawkins, “All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful” (*HB* 307). The craft of O’Connor’s storytelling lies in her ability to reveal these deeply spiritual moments of grace through physical and often violent moments of revelation for her characters. For O’Connor, spiritual conversion is a physical experience.

O’Connor believed that in order to reveal the spiritual reality through fiction, one must rely on the “concrete details of life that make actual the mystery of our position on earth” (*MM* 68). In the essay, “The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South,” O’Connor writes, “the things we see, hear, smell, and touch affect us long before we believe anything at all…" (*MM* 197). O’Connor’s descriptions of sensory detail are often unique and offer the reader an exact effect. The opening scene of “Greenleaf” introduces Mrs. May, a widow who lives on a dairy farm with her two sons, as she wakes up in the middle of the night to the sound of a bull chewing on shrubbery below her window. The inside of the room is silent until Mrs. May’s voice, “guttural as if addressed to a dog, said, ‘Get away from here, Sir!’” (*CS* 311) The woman’s nightgown hangs from her narrow frame, and “green rubber curlers sprouted neatly over her forehead and her face beneath them was smooth as concrete with an egg-white paste that drew the wrinkles out while she slept” (311). Mrs. May’s character description gives the reader a visible image of the character while also hinting at her inner disposition, her uncharitable impatience and insecurity. Similarly, the grandmother of “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” takes care

to present herself as a lady, in case she should be found dead on the side of the highway. The white violets on the brim of her hat and the white lace trim of her dress provide concrete details that also symbolize the grandmother's superficiality (118). O'Connor's physical descriptions allow the reader to buy into the story and then experience conversion alongside the protagonists. While O'Connor ultimately hoped to change readers through her fiction, she understood the importance of first providing an engaging story fixed in relatable sensory experiences.

Some of O'Connor's critics argue against defining O'Connor's work as Christian realism describing the events of her stories such as The Misfit's killing spree and Mrs. May's death by a neighbor's bull as inaccurate representations of the South. But O'Connor refused to subscribe to the belief that her literature needed to reflect the typical. Instead, O'Connor is famous for her use of the grotesque. For O'Connor, truth is deeply embedded in being, and O'Connor often relies on the most extreme example to compel her readers to see this truth. This is why O'Connor's fiction is filled with descriptions of characters that are often caricaturized and tossed into extraordinary circumstances. In her essay, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," O'Connor explains that the writer who believes in the essential mystery of life will be more interested in what is possible than what is probable: "He will be interested in characters who are forced out to meet evil and grace and who act on a trust beyond themselves—whether they know very clearly what it is they act upon or not" (*MM* 42). In "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," O'Connor slyly invites her reader to get into the car with the grandmother and her family on their trip to Florida. The circumstances of the family vacation are entirely believable, and the reader is immersed in the relatable dynamics

between the family members. Once the reader has accepted the reality of the story, O'Connor literally flips the car and exposes her characters and readers alike with the appearance of The Misfit and his band of killers. While the story may not reflect an ordinary day in the South, the reader is confronted with the mysteries the experience reveals. O'Connor's approach parallels the Incarnation, the Son of God taking human form; this pivotal moment in human history bridges the natural and the supernatural, beginning with the ordinary birth of a child and ending with the extraordinary Resurrection.

The distinction between naturalistic detail and literal detail is important to understanding O'Connor's use of symbolism and the grotesque. Strictly naturalistic detail, she says, reflects life as it is experienced, while literal detail reflects the meaning of the work. Because fiction, according to O'Connor, is an "incarnational art," "its truthfulness is the truthfulness of the essential that creates movement" (*MM* 68, 70). It is what animates the elements of life, the spirit of its being, that O'Connor unveils, especially through the grotesque. Desmond concludes that for O'Connor, "the symbol, then, is literal, understanding literal to mean a concrete detail that points to or helps to reveal the essence of a thing or action, essence being its deepest and ultimately mysterious reality, which is linked to the sources of being itself" (148) In other words, the truer reality, the one that O'Connor believes is most important for the fiction writer, is the one that is hidden within the literal details of physical elements.

The problem with much of the literary criticism concerning O'Connor's work is that scholars are unable to reconcile the realism and symbolism of O'Connor's fiction with the anagoge. However, Linehan argues that O'Connor's fiction seamlessly unites all

three elements. As a fictional realist O'Connor pushes back against the modern Manichean philosophy that isolates matter from spirit; at the core of O'Connor's anagogical perspective is the central mystery of Christianity, the Incarnation (Linehan 82-83). O'Connor addresses this Augustinian idea in "The Novelist and Believer:" "St. Augustine wrote that the things of the world pour forth from God in a double way: intellectually into the minds of the angels and physically into the world of things" (*MM* 157). O'Connor resisted a narrow realism that rests on the surface of what can be seen, and she contends that a writer concerned with the mysteries of life, "will be interested in what we don't understand rather than in what we do" (*MM* 42). The power of O'Connor's craft lies in her ability to create engaging stories that probe below the surface to draw her readers' attention to the mystery of where the sky meets the woods, the very real, symbolic, and anagogical place where God and man meet. Fundamentally, O'Connor believes that writing about the physical world will lead her readers to God because God is reflected in his creation. The writer, or the artist, does this by "penetrating the concrete" (157). To understand O'Connor's vision then is to understand the 'both and,' rather than simplifying her stories as biblical parables.

While the mystery O'Connor sets out to unveil may be challenging to discern, O'Connor's approach to symbolism is straightforward. In 1961, a professor wrote to O'Connor asking for an explanation regarding the character of Bailey in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." He proposed an elaborate interpretation that involved the story transitioning from reality to the grandmother's subconscious. O'Connor was shocked and replied, "If it were a legitimate interpretation, the story would be little more than a trick and its interest would be simply for abnormal psychology. I am not interested in

abnormal psychology" (*HB* 437). While O'Connor's fiction certainly challenges its reader, the symbolism she employs is frequently laid out and emphasized so the reader is forced to notice. The bull outside Mrs. May's window at the beginning of "Greenleaf" is, for Mrs. May, symbolic of Christ. The first sentence of the story compares the bull to a "patient god come down to woo [Mrs. May]" (*CS* 311). While the initial simile reminds the reader of Zeus becoming a bull to entice Europa, the hedge-wreath around the bull's horns that "looked like a menacing crown" shifts the imagery from the Greco-Roman laurel wreath to Christ's crown of thorns (312). When Mrs. May awakes the next morning, she finds the bull still outside her window "chewing calmly like an uncouth country suitor" (312). Here O'Connor reuses the simile of the bull as lover to draw the reader's attention towards a symbol of Christ the bridegroom, waiting for his bride outside her window, as all persistent lovers are apt to do. So, while Mrs. May refuses to acknowledge the presence of God, she is unable to rid herself of this ever-present bull.

O'Connor often uses motion in her fiction to symbolize the spiritual transformation of her characters. However, it is when the characters finally stop physically moving that they experience movement within their soul. William Ness explores this idea in relation with biblical journeys, such as the Israelites crossing the Red Sea, and alludes to the importance of the Incarnation in O'Connor's works: "The most extraordinary act in the New Testament involved a body suspended between earth and heaven affixed to a cross" (107). In "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," the grandmother's spiritual encounter begins, not as she is knocked off her horse by blinding light, but when the car veers off the road and rolls into a ditch. The physical motion of the journey to Florida and the car accident leave the grandmother off-balance and vulnerable. The

stillness then creates a moment that allows for her to look into The Misfit's eyes. This moment also reflects Aquinas's premise about grace working through nature; the two are in motion together both inwardly and outwardly.

O'Connor also uses an omniscient third person narrator to reveal the whole truth about her characters. She writes, "The truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it" (*HB* 100). The reader might find himself resisting identifying with O'Connor's protagonists, because she exposes the reality of sin and the characters' propensity towards sin, especially in the characters' thoughts. As Mrs. May is walking through the woods (which is symbolic of the divide between the physical and spiritual words in O'Connor's stories) and grumbling about Mr. Greenleaf's latest misdoing, she is assaulted by the name of Jesus. "The sound was so piercing that she felt as if some violent unleashed force had broke out of the ground and was charging toward her" (*CS* 316). Here O'Connor gives the reader explicit foreshadowing of Mrs. May's final encounter with the bull. The sound leads Mrs. May to find Mrs. Greenleaf on hands and knees crying out to Jesus over a pile of newspaper clippings of rape accounts, murders, train wrecks, and other tragedies. This event not only exposes Mrs. May's prejudices for Mrs. Greenleaf but also the hypocrisy of Mrs. May's religious beliefs. "[Mrs. May] thought the word, Jesus, should be kept inside the church building like other words inside the bedroom. She was a good Christian woman with a large respect for religion, though she did not, of course, believe any of it was true" (316). O'Connor unapologetically states the oxymoronic fact that Mrs. May, "a good Christian woman," has no faith. This, too, directs the reader to an understanding of a sacramental reality. O'Connor writes, "When

the physical fact is separated from the spiritual reality, the dissolution of belief is eventually inevitable" (*MM* 161-162).

Both O'Connor's life and fiction reflect her belief that the Incarnation demands a response. A daily communicant and convicted Catholic, O'Connor viewed her writing career as her vocation. In her personal prayer journal, she writes, "Don't let me ever think, dear God, that I was anything but the instrument for Your story" (*A Prayer Journal* 11). O'Connor also believed that her sufferings related to her lifelong battle with lupus would ultimately be redemptive. In a letter from 1956 to Elizabeth Hester, O'Connor writes "Sickness before death is a very appropriate thing and I think those who don't have it miss one of God's mercies" (*HB* 163). In many ways, O'Connor's personal story offers insight into O'Connor's core beliefs. Ironically, it is the convicted felon, The Misfit, that addresses this truth in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find":

> Jesus thrown everything off balance…Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead…and he shouldn't have done it. If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away every thing and follow Him, and if He didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can—by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness. (131-132)

The Misfit presents to the grandmother a simplified Pascal's Wager. The real irony here is that The Misfit understands the response demanded by the Incarnation; he simply doesn't believe Jesus to be the Son of God. The grandmother, whose moral convictions are as flimsy as her destroyed sunhat, claims to be Christian but her actions are shallow

and manipulative. The insincerity of her faith is evident in her last moments as she responds to The Misfit, “Maybe He didn’t raise the dead” (132).

The revelation of the Incarnation’s implications occurs simultaneously for The Misfit and the grandmother. When The Misfit replies, “Listen Lady…if I had of been there I would of known and I wouldn’t be like I am now,” his voice cracks, and in a moment of clarity, the grandmother says to him, “Why you’re one of my babies. You’re one of my own children!” (*CS* 132). The grandmother speaks with sincerity as she recognizes The Misfit’s humanity through his brokenness. As she reaches out to touch his shoulder, The Misfit shoots her three times in her chest. This moment of revelation is redemptive for the grandmother who is left sitting cross-legged like a child with “her face smiling up at the cloudless sky” (132). No longer protected by the sun from her hat or the car, the grandmother experiences the full force of the sun’s light. The impact of this revelation is less clear for The Misfit. Initially described as wearing “silver-rimmed spectacles that gave him a scholarly look,” The Misfit’s eyes are now “red-rimmed and pale and defenseless-looking” (132-133). When his henchmen crack jokes about the grandmother, The Misfit immediately silences them and says, “It’s no real pleasure in life” (133). O’Connor allows her characters free will in their response to these moments of revelation; what matters most is the understanding that a response is demanded.

In many of O’Connor’s stories, the realization of the Incarnation and its mysteries is painful for her characters. The light of this truth exposes the reality of their sin, especially their hypocrisy. Mrs. May’s revelation comes as she waits on the front bumper of her car for Mr. Greenleaf to return from shooting the bull in the woods. She spends her time imagining the reasons why she is justified in having Mr. Greenleaf shoot his sons’

bull, even feeling satisfaction at the idea of the bull impaling Mr. Greenleaf. In "The Fiction Writer and His Country," O'Connor writes that to know oneself means "to measure oneself against Truth, and not the other way around" (*MM* 30). This is why, even as the bull emerges from the forest and charges at Mrs. May, she remains "perfectly still, not in fright, but in a freezing unbelief" (*CS* 333). For O'Connor, the charging bull symbolizes quite literally the effect of the Incarnation, the ultimate Truth, and its inescapable reality.

The ramifications of these realizations incur both spiritual and physical damage to O'Connor's characters. O'Connor intends to show her readers the inseparable relationship between the divine and the human, the temporal and the eternal. Desmond notes, "the *claritas* of grace—the movement of the spirit—comes through the ordinary world, the literal, which is itself a representation of divine being" (154). This is why Mrs. May and the grandmother's conversions must be physical, as well as spiritual. Jennifer Frey succinctly summarizes St. Thomas Aquinas's theology on grace: "Reality includes both God's creation as communicative and ordered to his own goodness but also God's activity in sustaining His creation in being and also working to bring it back to Himself" (21:45-22:01). Aquinas believed that God works through nature, and Catholic teaching emphasizes the necessity of the physical matter in each of the Church's sacraments.

In the Eucharist, the reality of Christ's presence also includes the reality of the physical matter of bread. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states, "By the consecration the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ is brought about. Under the consecrated species of bread and wine Christ himself, living and glorious, is present in a true, real, and substantial manner: his Body and his

Blood, with his soul and divinity" (*CCC* 1413). Desmond claims O'Connor's emphasis on physical objects reflects "the belief that the substance of the material objects is central to the mystery and meaning of the sacrament" (144). And this is precisely the theology that is mimicked in O'Connor's stories. O'Connor describes the bull as a "wild tormented lover" as "one of his horns sank until it pierced her heart and the other curved around her side and held her in an unbreakable grip" (*CS* 333). As a daily communicant, O'Connor experienced this intimacy by receiving the Eucharist, and she felt it was as real as the horns of a bull. For O'Connor, "the ultimate reality is the Incarnation" (*HB* 92).

Amidst the pain and violence, Mrs. May continues to look straight ahead at the tree line and the sky with "the look of a person whose sight has been suddenly restored but who finds the light unbearable" (333). Linehan explores the relationship between the physical and spiritual realms through O'Connor's use of the woods and the sun as a "skyscape." When O'Connor's characters look towards the sky, their vision often also includes the woods; this blurs the distinction between the point where heaven and earth come together (80). The tree line in "Greenleaf" is described as "a dark wound in a world that was nothing but sky" (333). Mrs. May's violent death is paired with this divine vision. The reader does not hear Mrs. May proclaim her conversion, but rather, the final sentence of the story leaves the reader with an image worth pondering. As Mr. Greenleaf shoots the bull, it falls to the ground and Mrs. May is pulled forward over its head as if "whispering some last discovery into the animal's ear" (334). O'Connor offers her reader space to consider what this revelation means for Mrs. May and for themselves.

The grandmother's fate in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is similarly both violent and intimate. When The Misfit's voice cracks and he nearly begins to cry, the

grandmother sees his face “twisted close to her own” (132), and she claims him as one of her own. Just as Mrs. May is pierced in the heart, the grandmother is shot in the heart. Mrs. May’s vision is spiritually and physically directed upward, as is the grandmother’s at her death. The superficiality of each woman’s faith is annihilated by their encounter with Truth, and their bodies and souls are eternally changed.

O’Connor’s fiction, rooted in her uncompromising belief in the Eucharist, offers readers transformative moments of grace that are necessarily both physical and spiritual. Just as the Eucharist is both physical matter and the divine presence of God, O’Connor’s writing must be read as both literary and theological, a symbolic and tangible portrayal of sacramental reality. Isolating only the hermeneutical elements of O’Connor’s work inaccurately labels O’Connor as a homiletic, which is far from her intended purpose. Conversely, ignoring the theological core of O’Connor’s fiction leaves the reader with nihilism, an idea O’Connor sought to combat. O’Connor was well aware of the hostility of her audience once described as the “Christ-haunted South.” While the Gnosticism of the 21st century pushes O’Connor’s readers further from a Christian culture, O’Connor’s stories hold the same effect. Reflecting on her response to Mary McCarthy, O’Connor writes, “That was all the defense I was capable of but I realize now that this is all I will ever be able to say about it, outside of a story, except that it is the center of existence for me; all the rest of life is expendable” (*HB* 125).

The following chapters explore how O’Connor’s Catholic imagination gives O'Connor eyes to see the collision of grace and nature as God seeks intimacy with His creation. O’Connor’s depiction of man simultaneously strips him of false pretenses and allusions and illuminates man’s innate dignity as a child of God. Chapters one and four

compare O’Connor’s fiction with the work of Graham Greene and Elizabeth Bishop to analyze the distinctive qualities of O’Connor’s writing that set her apart from writers who also draw readers towards experiencing the mystery hidden within the material world. O’Connor’s fiction flows from the central teaching of the Catholic Church that God became man, and the ripple-effect of the Incarnation permeates everything. O’Connor’s fiction concludes that the reality of God is inescapable, and one must foster the habit of looking beyond what is concrete to recognize and respond to God’s grace.

Chapter 1: O'Connor & Greene: The Divine Lover

Thelma J. Shinn echoes the claim of many O'Connor scholars in her 1968 article "Flannery O'Connor and the Violence of Grace": "Miss O'Connor used violence to convey her vision because she knew that the violence of rejection in the modern world demands an equal violence of redemption – man needs to be 'struck' by mercy; God must overpower him" (58). At first glance, O'Connor's commentary on the role of a fiction writer in the 20th century seems to support this idea. In her collection of essays and lectures *Mystery and Manners*, O'Connor writes, "When you have to assume that [your audience does not hold the same beliefs as you], then you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures" (34). The problem arises when critics assume the shock value of O'Connor's conversion moments, which are often intense and physically painful for her characters, reveals a God who overpowers and annihilates both free will and the body of His beloved.

Ralph Wood's "Flannery O'Connor, Benedict XVI, and the Divine Eros" offers a counterpoint to the assumption that O'Connor fights modernist nihilism with spiritual nihilism using Benedict XVI's 2005 encyclical "Deus Caritas Est" - in English, *God is Love.* The encyclical explores the Greek words for love: *eros, agape,* and *philia*; and presents *eros*, typically associated by Christians with the lower human desires and even vice, as the vital second half of *agape* in the Christian's relationship with God. *Agape*, defined by Benedict, is love that seeks the good of the beloved; it involves "a real discovery of the other...and it is ready, even willing, for sacrifice" (5). In short, Wood argues that O'Connor pushes against Nietzsche's assertion that Christianity poisoned *eros*

through her portrayal of God as Lover. Wood briefly recounts O'Connor's "Greenleaf" and the moment of Mrs. May's conversion as she is pierced in the heart by the bull, a symbol of Divine Love. Wood states, "Benedict believes… that true eros finds its fulfillment rather than frustration in agape…Benedict wants to reclaim eros for the Church, regarding it as an authentic sign of the human hunger for and expression of the Holy" (42). Like O'Connor, Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair* places emphasis on the physical aspect of humans' experience of love – even divine love – which directly supports Benedict's conclusion that *eros* is inherently good and ordered towards God. While Greene's portrayal of conversion in *The End of the Affair* is a slow, psychologically and emotionally taxing experience, Greene's choice to prompt the characters' conversion with an illicit sexual relationship, points to this connection between human and divine love, *eros* and *agape*. Greene counterbalances the rashness of O'Connor's instantaneous conversions of brutal grace with a conversion that stems from a deep longing for the heart of God. O'Connor and Greene use violence and sex, not purely to shock the reader, but to help the reader understand how God desires to love his creation, entirely and intimately.

To understand O'Connor's use of violence and Greene's use of an illicit affair to explore Christian conversion and the depth of God's love, fundamentally one must recognize God as the source of love. In the First Letter of John, the apostle writes, "Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love" (1 Jn 4:8) and he emphasizes this point further asserting, "God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him" (1 Jn 4:16). It is the Word made flesh, Jesus Incarnate, that O'Connor calls "the fulcrum that lifts my particular stories" (*HB* 227). O'Connor's

response to McCarthy's statement about the Eucharist emphasizes that the Eucharist is not a mere symbol of God's love; the Eucharist is "the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ" (*CCC* 1374). In the Incarnation and Christ's total self-gift in the Eucharist, Benedict XVI explains, the Old Testament marriage imagery between God and Israel becomes a sacramental experience of God's divine love, agape (10). Benedict XVI counters the assumption that *eros* is a worldly and non-Christian experience by illuminating how the two types of love are necessary halves of "the one reality of love":

> Even if *eros* is at first mainly covetous and ascending, a fascination for the great promise of happiness, in drawing near to the other, it is less and less concerned with itself, increasingly seeks the happiness of the other, is concerned more and more with the beloved, bestows itself and wants to "be there for" the other. The element of *agape* thus enters into this love, for otherwise *eros* is impoverished and even loses its own nature. (6)

The dissatisfaction of O'Connor and Greene's characters in their unfulfilled human relationships is explained by their inward attempts at love, each seeking self-gratification. Mrs. May's pride and distrust of God and Bendrix's attempt to make Sarah his personal god leaves both characters unsatisfied. O'Connor's emphasis on the body as part of the spiritual reality and Greene's use of sexual desire to propel spiritual conversion reveal the intimacy and realness of Catholics' experience of God's love, a tangible experience of consuming Christ's body and becoming "one body" in the sacrament of Holy Communion, as St. Paul writes in the Letters to the Corinthians (1 Cor 10:17).

In her short story "Greenleaf" O'Connor explicitly depicts Christ as lover, disguised as escaped bull. The opening sentence of the story reveals the metaphor of the bull as Christ: "Mrs. May's bedroom window was low and faced on the east and the bull, silvered in the moonlight, stood under it, his head raised as he listened—like some patient god come down to woo her—for a stir inside the room" (311). Not coincidentally does Mrs. May's window face *ad orientum*, the eastward orientation of Christian prayer and worship, looking out at the bull waiting for her acknowledgement. O'Connor uses the moonlight and Mrs. May's vulnerability in her bedroom to create an intimate and mystical setting fit for a kind of spiritual vision. The simile comparing the bull to a "patient god" challenges the notion of a violent bull that destroys; this bull simply waits for Mrs. May as a lover waits for the beloved. O'Connor solidifies the metaphor through the imagery of the hedge-wreath caught in the bull's horns that creates a crown, an allusion to Christ's crown of thorns. The metaphor touches on the power in Christ's divinity that is veiled by Christ's humanity. The bull's power, a power that can wreak incredible havoc, is like a loaded spring hidden within its docile appearance.

Another prominent characteristic of the bull is its "steady rhythmic chewing," a description that O'Connor repeats five times within the first few paragraphs of the story. In a dreamlike state, Mrs. May imagines that she has heard this steady chewing since she first moved to the farm, and she fears that the bull will continue munching until it has eaten the house, her boys, and herself. O'Connor writes, "The bull…was standing about four feet from [Mrs. May], chewing calmly like an uncouth country suitor" (312). The bull's presence is mostly passive, not an obvious and immediate threat to Mrs. May, but one that causes her discomfort, and his constancy is inescapable. O'Connor once referred

to the south as "Christ-haunted" (*MM* 44), a description that parallels Mrs. May's perception of the bull's presence on her farm. O'Connor writes, "The Southerner...is very much afraid that he may have been formed in the image and likeness of God. Ghosts can be very fierce and instructive. They cast strange shadows..." (44). The imposing bull literally casts a shadow on Mrs. May's bedroom window, making it impossible for her to escape what she fears is true.

Greene's *The End of the Affair* offers a similar truth about God's constancy in the lives of His creation through Sarah Mile's lifelong journey of conversion. After Sarah's death of pneumonia, the result of Sarah's walk in the rain to avoid the temptation of resuming her affair with Bendrix, Mrs. Bertram, Sarah's mother, admits to Bendrix that Sarah is a baptized Catholic. Mrs. Bertram explains that she brought Sarah to a Catholic priest to be baptized as an act of revenge against her husband. Bertram's casual tone in relaying the event contrasts the monumental shift the sacrament creates in Sarah's life. Through tears, Mrs. Bertram expresses her regret for Sarah's life: "I always had a wish that it would 'take.' Like vaccination" (136). The dramatic irony of this statement is poetically expressed by Sarah in her journal in Book III of the novel as she explains her desire to believe in God despite its difficulty: "I've caught belief like a disease" (121). Just as Mrs. May's acknowledgement of the bull drives her actions throughout the narrative, Sarah's baptism and the actual grace of the sacrament draw Sarah towards her Catholic identity, even while she is unaware of her baptism.

Greene and O'Connor each address the complicated relationship between grace and free will in their character's conversions. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, "The divine initiative in the work of grace precedes, prepares, and elicits the free

response of man. Grace responds to the deepest yearnings of human freedom, calls freedom to cooperate with it, and perfects freedom" (para 2022). In a 1955 letter, O'Connor refers to what the Catholic Church calls sanctifying grace operating in her own life: "...what one has as a born Catholic is something given and accepted before it is experienced. I am only slowly coming to experience things that I have all along accepted" (*HB* 97). Like Sarah, O'Connor recognizes how the grace she received at her baptism allowed her to accept in faith the teachings of the Church and these truths are verified by her experiences. Sarah's experience of grace is like the haunting O'Connor describes for Southerners. When Sarah is faced with the crisis of losing Bendrix, her instinctual response is prayer. The immediacy of her turn towards God amid suffering reveals how her soul was primed at her baptism by grace to receive grace. Daria Spezzano, author of *The Glory of God's Grace: Deification According to St. Thomas Aquinas* explains:

> God's causal transcendence allows the simultaneous non-competitive action of grace and free will. Aquinas explains that 'when one is said to do what is in him, this is said to be in his power according as he is moved by God': one is truly said to 'turn to God' in conversion, but only because he is turned by God, who 'inspires the good wish.' (I–II.109.6 ad 2)

In other words, Sarah and Mrs. May are propelled by the grace they receive in their baptisms towards God, who continuously offers grace to each woman so that they might choose to continue their conversions. Sarah's baptism creates a ripple effect in her life, one that alters both her body and soul, even while she is unaware of her spiritual adoption.

While O'Connor's Mrs. May struggles to escape the physical presence of the bull, Greene's characters wrestle with the lack of God's physical presence. Sarah and Bendrix each struggle to understand how to approach believing, much less loving, a God they cannot touch. After ending her affair with Bendrix, Sarah writes in her journal, "But, dear God, what shall I do with this desire to love?" (74). The beginning of Sarah's understanding of God builds from her understanding of her romantic relationship with Bendrix. Michael Gorra's introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of Greene's *The End of the Affair* notes the scandal of Greene's premise that Sarah's belief in God is sparked by sex: "Erotic experience has brought her to a knowledge of the divine and even into a state of grace" (viii). In other words, even Sarah's experience of corrupt human love in her tumultuous relationship with Bendrix offers her a foretaste of the purer and infinitely more satisfying experience of Divine Love. Though distorted, Sarah's illicit affair exposes her deep longing for love. Greene uses the crucifix hanging in the Catholic Church to spur Sarah's reflection on her hatred of God for taking away her physical experience of love with Bendrix. Looking upon the crucified Christ, Sarah is struck by the "material body on that material cross" (89) and begins to realize how her hatred of God is also indicative of her belief in God with the question "…but can one hate a vapour?" (89) Bendrix, too, begins his conversion with an acknowledgement of God in his hatred for God.

The emphasis placed on the physical body in both O'Connor and Greene's narratives bridges the spiritual and material realities of conversion. The portrayal of God as a patient and faithful lover begs the question "Why do the characters resist Divine Love?" Mrs. May is willing to work herself to death to provide for her ungrateful and

berating sons, and Bendrix abandons his work as a writer and his future with a family for his obsession with Sarah and her affection for him. Both characters rely on their perception of control as a defense mechanism, and they are aware that a relationship with God is one that requires sacrifice. Susan Srigley's "The Violence of Love" defines O'Connor's understanding of love using Christ's words in the Gospel to "take up your cross and follow me" (Mt 16:24). Srigley writes, "It is not a modern or popular conception of love—commonly tied to the gratification of one's desires rather than the disciplined ordering of them—but it is the heart of O'Connor's religious vision" (37). The characters resist God's Divine Love because they fear the suffering that sacrificial love demands. Ironically, by refusing their crosses, Mrs. May and Bendrix do not evade suffering; both characters live a lonely life of suffering that does not serve a greater purpose.

Mrs. May's fear of suffering is revealed through her obsession with the bull and the consequences of his presence on her farm. Even in her sleep, Mrs. May dreams that the bull will consume her farm and her family. To Mr. Greenleaf Mrs. May says, "You know he'll ruin the breeding schedule…" (314). Mrs. May's desire to control everything is also evident in the way she treats her sons; she goes as far to alter her will to prohibit her sons from leaving the land to their wives who might "ruin everything" (315). The most prominent example of Mrs. May's fear is illustrated by her reaction to hearing Mrs. Greenleaf crying out, "Jesus! Jesus!" (316). In a less than subtle moment of foreshadowing, O'Connor writes that for Mrs. May "the sound was so piercing that she felt as if some violent unleashed force had broken out of the ground and was charging toward her" (316). She winces at the sound of Jesus's name because she believes "the

word, Jesus, should be kept inside the church building like other words inside the bedroom" (316). Mrs. May recognizes the intimacy of even the name of Jesus, and the simple utterance of His name causes her physical pain. O'Connor uses "furious" and "helpless" (317) to describe Mrs. May's response to Mrs. Greenleaf's charismatic and emotional prayer to show how Mrs. May feels threatened by God and the demands of discipleship.

Rather than from a desire to control, Sarah Miles's hesitancy to conversion and the reception of Divine Love stems from her fear of emotional and physical suffering. The first journal entry that Bendrix reads reveals Sarah's earliest prayer about suffering: "Dear God, you know I want to want Your pain, but I don't want it now. Take it away for a while and give me another time" (71). O'Connor herself admits to this same fear in her *Prayer Journal* when she writes, "I am afraid of pain and I suppose that this is what we have to have to get grace. Give me the courage to stand the pain to get the grace" (13). Sarah's "want to want" echoes O'Connor's "have to have" and together they reveal the necessary element of suffering in conversion. Michon M. Matthieson notes that O'Connor's journal reveals her own prayers for the desire to become a saint with the understanding that "A living love must surely be one of vulnerability, one tried in fire" (118). Near the end of the novel, Bendrix, too, recognizes the price of Sarah's decision: "If I begin to love God, I can't just die. I've got to do something about it" (152). O'Connor and Greene each point to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's assertion in *The Cost of Discipleship* that "[Grace] is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life" (47). The recognition of the reality of God demands a response, and the Gospels clearly present that this response is a journey towards Calvary.

O'Connor and Greene, though Greene less directly, point their readers to this truth – that the fullest experience of Divine Love can only be found in unity with Christ on the cross.

It is precisely O'Connor's belief in the costliness of grace that propels her to use violence to show the reader the complete impact, both physical and spiritual, of receiving the love of God. O'Connor utilizes the sun as a symbol of impending grace as Mrs. May attempts to orchestrate a plan for removing the bull from her farm; the foreshadowing prepares the reader for Mrs. May's violent conversion at the end of the story. In the afternoon, Mrs. May snoops around the Greenleaf milking parlor and she is nearly blinded by the brightness of the light and the metal stanchions. When she leaves, Mrs. May feels the sun beating down on her head "like a silver bullet ready to drop into her brain" (325). As Mrs. May drives Mr. Greenleaf out to the pasture to kill the bull, O'Connor describes the setting sun behind bars of purple and red clouds until it disappears completely behind the tree line. Her paranoia about the sun, God's grace, is evident in Mrs. May's dream from the night before in which she imagined the sun burning through the tree line while she watched "safe in the knowledge that it couldn't, that it had to sink the way it always did outside her property" (329). In the next instant, she sees the sun break through the trees and racing towards her "like a bullet" (329) and she awakes to find the bull outside her window once again. Mrs. May's obsession and paranoia operate similarly to Sarah's hatred of God: this is Mrs. May's first step towards true belief. While readers may find Mrs. May's violent revelation sudden, a close reading of the text reveals a subtle admission of belief in Mrs. May's fear. Just as Sarah admits she can't hate a vapour, Mrs. May acknowledges the existence of what, or who, she fears.

The threatening aspects of the bull and the sun are only what Mrs. May has attributed to them as symbols of Christ and His grace.

The suffering endured by Greene's Sarah Miles also follows the pattern of emotional suffering leading to physical suffering; the two types of suffering are intricately intertwined. Gorra describes Sarah's suffering in her promise to end her affair with Bendrix "as though Sarah has punched a hole through her heart, a hole that is both defined and then filled by God" (xx). The space created by Sarah's physical and emotional longing for Bendrix creates room for Sarah to realize the deepest longing of her heart, a longing that cannot be satisfied by human love. Sarah professes her belief to God as she writes in her journal, "I've fallen into belief like I fell in love. I've never loved before as I love you, and I've never before believed in anything before as I believe now. I'm sure" (121). Gorra continues by arguing that if Sarah had not suffered pain in losing Bendrix, she would not need to believe because for Greene "faith is… a form of suffering" (xx). This is why Greene aptly uses the metaphor of faith as a disease, which ultimately leads Sarah to sainthood.

Sarah's redemption from a "bitch and fake" (Greene 97) to sainthood is explicitly outlined by the series of miracles that are attributed to Sarah after her death. Rather than using the miracles to prove Sarah's belief, Greene employs the miracles to solidify the existence of God for both Bendrix and the reader. Bendrix turns to God with the same fear found in Mrs. May when he finally addresses God as Sarah first did in the initial stages of her conversion. "I hate You, God, I hate You as though you existed" (159). The parallelism in Sarah and Bendrix's slow conversion towards God offers the reader hopefulness in the projection of Bendrix's journey, despite the closing sentence of the

novel in which Bendrix tells God, “Leave me alone for ever” (160). Bendrix’s admission of his old age and tiredness hint to his submission in fighting the graces of God that blessed him with in the moment of Sarah’s prayer for his survival on the day of her vow to God.

Mrs. May’s encounter with Divine Love also includes a submission to her human weakness. The details leading up to Mrs. May’s final revelation include five references to Mrs. May’s exhaustion. As she waits for Mr. Greenleaf, she is overcome with tiredness, and she wonders how she could feel so tired early in the day. Eventually she concludes that her tiredness stems from a lifetime of working and that she has every right to be tired. Mrs. May’s submission to sleep signifies a greater submission to the will of God, even if the choice is made subconsciously. O’Connor poses that Mrs. May’s exhaustion stems from her constant vigilance to avoid God, thus the reason Mrs. May first notices the bull in the middle of the night.

As a cradle Catholic who attended Catholic grade school, O’Connor would have certainly understood the Catholic Church’s teaching on free will. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states, “God’s free initiative demands man’s free response, for God has created man in his image by conferring on him, along with freedom, the power to know him and love him” (2002). The moment of conversion must always stem from a free choice to love God above oneself. In “O’Connor, Benedict XVI, and the Divine Eros” Ralph Wood states, “Divine grace never *irrupts* into the realm of ‘pure nature,’ as if it were a virtual dominion unto itself…it erupts from within the very nature and existence of things, bursting outward, so as to transform them” (44). God made man in His own image, and O’Connor’s conversions involve a purification that strips the characters of

their sinfulness to reveal their likeness to the Divine Lover. O'Connor offers that the truest reality is the human identity reflecting the love of the Creator. Benedict XVI writes, "His death on the Cross is the culmination of that turning of God against himself in which he gives himself [as true Lover] in order to raise man up and save him. This is love in its most radical form" (12). A close reading of Mrs. May's physical and psychological response to the bull hints at Mrs. May's choice to reject the light of truth and her own salvation.

Though the reality of the situation is violent, O'Connor's diction portrays the bull's goring as the excited embrace of a lover. Mrs. May sees the bull as it crosses the pasture "at a slow gallop, a gay almost rocking gait as if he were overjoyed to find her again" (333). O'Connor's use of diction emphasizes the bull's desire to be close with Mrs. May rather than an instinctual drive to challenge Mrs. May as if she were a threat to his existence. While the bull races towards her, Mrs. May "remained perfectly still, not in fright, but in a freezing unbelief" (333). O'Connor subtly swaps Mrs. May's constant fear of losing control with the simplicity of unbelief. Then she stares at the bull trying to determine his intention until it "buried his head in her lap, like a wild tormented lover" (333). Only then does Mrs. May's expression change. "One of his horns sank until it pierced her heart and the other curved around her side and held her in an unbreakable grip" (333). The sexual imagery of the bull physically entering Mrs. May's heart incarnates O'Connor's belief in the significance of the body as a necessary component of spiritual restoration. When Mrs. May's heart is pierced with the love of God, she must recognize the spiritual reality that she has refused to see. O'Connor writes: "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 has been suddenly restored but who finds the light unbearable" (333). Foreshadowed by the unbearable brightness of the milking parlor, Mrs. May's step into the light from a lifetime of darkness leaves her blinded by its brightness and completely exposed.

O'Connor's depiction of Mrs. May's gored heart is reminiscent of Bernini's sculpture, *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa,* in its fusion of suffering with the ecstasy of experiencing Divine Love. Mrs. May seems to swoon as the bull pulls her forward towards his head, and her bleeding heart and still conscious mind are united in their bowing to recognize the divinity of God. St. Teresa of Avila's description of her mystical experience of Christ piercing her heart with arrows and leaving her entirely consumed by Divine Love offers insight into Mrs. May's intimate encounter. St. Teresa of Avila writes, "...so excessive was the sweetness caused me by this intense pain that one can never wish it to cease, nor will one's soul be content with anything less than God" (164). The illuminating truth of Mrs. May's revelation is particularly painful because Mrs. May's selfishness and pride become unbearably clear.

The discomfort Mrs. May experiences in her moment of revelation creates unresolved tension that leaves Mrs. May's spiritual fate ambiguous, much like Greene's Bendrix. O'Connor critic, Jessica Hooten Wilson, argues that the detail of Mrs. May finding the light unbearable suggests that Mrs. May does not enter eternal salvation at the story's end. In her reading of "Greenleaf" Hooten states that Mrs. May, at the moment of her piercing, is still able to exercise free will: "And that's the choice always, whether or not to be damned by a certain piercing or fire or bullet or to find it purgatorial that

changes you and purges you of the things that are not supposed to be in your life" (Wilson 00:14:52-00:15:07). Hooten concludes by drawing attention to Mrs. May's bent shape as she sinks to the ground with the bull as Mr. Greenleaf shoots it. Mrs. May's physically crumpled body reflects the distortion of her soul as she is unfit for the beatific vision of God.

The ambiguity in Mrs. May's final moment is contested among O'Connor's critics. In his book, *Flannery O'Connor and the Mystery of Grace*, Richard Giannone, summarizes these claims about Mrs. May's death as "the usual reduction of her complexity into one more grotesque finale that turns on a 'dreadful stroke of irony'" (167). Eleonore Stump concurs with Giannone's rejection of this sort of reduction in her claim that "[The redeeming benefit of suffering] might not be evident to anyone lacking a God's-eye view of the whole life of the sufferer" (as cited in Matthieson 125). However, to read the scene as Mrs. May's final rejection of Christ's love does not necessarily oversimplify her experience of God. Benedict XVI writes that the fundamental decision of one's life is to believe in God's love, and that "being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction" (1). It is Mrs. May's ability to fix her gaze forward and remain unchanged, even as the spiritual world opens before her, that proves the role of consent in receiving God's grace. While the encounter with Divine Love is inevitable, Mrs. May refuses the necessary transformation of her soul. On their way to shoot the bull, Mrs. May tells Mr. Greenleaf, "I'm afraid your wife has let religion warp her" (CS 332). Mrs. May's belief that religion should be practiced in moderation bars her from accepting in faith the transformative power of grace. The irony is that Mrs. May is left warped,

physically and spiritually, by her resistance to the transformative power of grace, which is foreshadowed by her unwillingness to permit changes to her property, the physical representation of Mrs. May's soul.

Contrasting Mrs. May's demise with the grandmother's equally violent death in O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" reveals differences in imagery and tone that convey each women's spiritual fate. The grandmother is shot in the chest three times and is left half sitting and half laying "in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a child's and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky" (CS 132). The child-like posture, upward gaze, smiling face, and bleeding heart suggests that the grandmother is at peace for the first time in the story. When she recognizes the twistedness in the Misfit's face and identifies him as one of her own children, the grandmother's perspective changes. The once judgmental grandmother sees Christ in the least morally upright character. In the final scene of "Greenleaf," however, Mrs. May's gaze is unchanged, even as the bull charges into her body. Mrs. May sees Mr. Greenleaf "approaching on the outside of some invisible circle" (334) from "the tree line that was a dark wound in a world that was nothing but sky" (333), descriptions reminiscent of Dante's *Inferno*. Mr. Greenleaf shoots the bull, the Divine Lover, and Mrs. May "did not hear the shots but she felt the quake in the huge body as it sank, pulling her forward on its head" (334). Mrs. May's downward gaze parallels her constant preoccupation with worldly matters throughout her life and suggests that her habitual unwillingness to address the Divine in her neighbors, specifically the Greenleaf family, hardens her against receiving redemptive grace.

In a letter to Janet McKane, O'Connor writes about suffering and joy: "…joy is the outgrowth of suffering in a special way…sickness before death is a very appropriate thing and I think those who don't have it miss one of God's mercies (HB 527) The mystery of God's mercy and human suffering stems from human blindness and rigidity, according to Teilhard de Chardin. Chardin continues that suffering is first perceived as "an Adversary" but that the grace of God allows us to accept suffering as the pathway to sanctity as it "uproots our egotism and centers us more completely on God" (as cited in Leigh 366). Sarah captures the limited scope of human perspective in her admission that God's mercy "sometimes looks like punishment" (Greene 120). For O'Connor, suffering is redemptive in that in offers humanity a share in the Divinity of Christ, through his passion, death, and resurrection. In 1955, O'Connor writes to Betty Hester, "…I think that when I know what the laws of the flesh and the physical really are, then I will know what God is. We know them as we see them, not as God sees them" (*HB* 100). The apparent contradiction of joy and suffering challenges O'Connor, Greene, and their readers, and it is precisely this mystery that propels their narratives. The characters (and authors) ask "How can this be?" even while their experiences of Divine Love prove the necessity of suffering as part of their experience of joy, at least while on earth.

Mrs. May's refusal to allow religious belief to permeate her world contrasts with Mrs. Greenleaf's visceral prayer experience in the woods. Mrs. Greenleaf weeps over newspaper articles about people suffering and sprawls out across the ground "as if she were trying to wrap [her arms] around the earth" (*CS* 317). Mrs. May feels attacked by Mrs. Greenleaf's emotional prayer and demands that Mrs. Greenleaf pick herself up and "go wash your children's clothes!" (317). Mrs. Greenleaf's personal faith does not fit into

Mrs. May's belief that religion should be compartmentalized and kept at a safe distance. Ironically, Mrs. Greenleaf's acknowledgement of suffering and sin in the world gives meaning to her own suffering. Mrs. Greenleaf's sons are successful in their careers and they both marry and begin families of their own. Mrs. May's boys treat their mother with bitter resentment and remain as alone and unsuccessful as Mrs. May. During a typical May family conversation at the dinner table, Wesley, the son with a heart condition, tells his mother, "I wouldn't milk a cow to save your soul from hell" (321). The May family members recognize the ugliness of each other's souls and seek to escape the deep unhappiness within their home. The narrator notes that the two boys were different in every way except "that neither of them cared what happened on the place" (314). Mrs. May's constant preoccupation with keeping up appearances and comparing her sons to the Greenleaf boys deadens her soul and the future of her farm. O'Connor relies on the health of Mrs. May's physical body and prosperity of the property to reveal the deadness of her soul.

In both stories, the context of marriage and family life plays a key role in unveiling the mystery of God as the Divine Lover. The character's capacity to accept and recognize sacrificial love is first exposed in their families. After her bargain with God at Bendrix's apparent death, Sarah realizes that if she genuinely loves Bendrix, she must give up their affair. Sarah's entrenchment in lust prevents her from experiencing complete communion with God, even as God works through the affair to draw Sarah to himself. Like many of O'Connor's female protagonists, Mrs. May is widowed, and Mr. May is mentioned only briefly to explain how Mrs. May came to run the dairy farm. Mrs. May's relationship with her sons, who are as selfish and self-centered as their mother,

and the farm's dying future is evidence of the family's lack of love and fruitfulness. The May family is foiled by the Greenleaf brothers who are "healthy and thriving" with young, growing families and new farm equipment to promote the success of their business.

Two subtle "Greenleaf" details that support Hooten Wilson's assertion that Mrs. May does not attain eternal life are the names of Mrs. May's two sons, Wesley, and Scofield. Presumably named for the founder of Methodism, John Wesley, and Congregationalist minister, C. I. Scofield, the boys represent two viewpoints on the relationship of grace and freewill. John Wesley ascribed to the Arminian teaching of total depravity, which is the belief that human nature became entirely corrupt after the fall of Adam. This belief opposes Thomas Aquinas's key teaching that man is made in God's image, the *Imago Dei*. In short, John Wesley taught that man has no free will apart from prevenient grace, the free gift of grace offered by God to man before man chooses to accept it. This teaching is reflected in Wesley May's refusal to alter his circumstances despite his hatred for his job, his family, and every element of his life. Whereas the Greenleaf twin boys become successful war veterans, husbands, and fathers, Wesley and Scofield live with their mother and refuse to contribute to the future of the family dairy farm. Wesley is described as "thin and nervous and bald" and Mrs. May believes the rheumatic fever Wesley suffered as a child caused his becoming an intellectual (*CS* 314). While Scofield aggravates Mrs. May, it is Wesley who "caused her real anxiety" (319). Twice in the story Wesley tells his mother to pray like Mrs. Greenleaf: "Well, why don't you do something practical, Woman? Why don't you pray for me like Mrs. Greenleaf would?" (320) Wesley recognizes the superficiality of his mother's life and the futility of

her grasping for control, but instead of pursuing sanctification in his own life, he remains complacent in his misery.

Scofield May, who is in many ways the opposite of his brother, is named for the best-selling author of the Scofield Reference Bible which popularized dispensationalism, especially among fundamentalist Christian denominations. Scofield May sells insurance to the black community, mostly for burial expenses. Throughout the story Mrs. May is obsessed about self-preservation – the bull threatens her heard and her land and her boys threaten her legacy and farm. The redemption of Mrs. May's property relies on her insurance, what Sexton calls "a secular, materialistic salvation" (39). However dependent Mrs. May is on her own policy, she denies her relationship with her son when one of the Greenleaf workers asks, "Is you my policy man's mother?" (*CS* 326). Mrs. May's shame for how her son exploits poor customers exhibits the woman's hypocrisy and selfishness. The fruit of Mrs. May, her children, are the external embodiment of Mrs. May's vices.

O'Connor and Greene capture the challenges of conversion, especially the steep demand that one must embrace the cross before entering the joy of eternal salvation. O'Connor's use of violence and Greene's emphasis on sexual intimacy reveal the necessity of suffering to fully experiencing the depth of Christ's infinite love. While the non-believing reader might be scandalized or shocked by O'Connor and Greene's portrayals of revelation and conversion, the believer recognizes the redemptive possibility of human suffering. Matthieson echoes St. Teresa's claim that "suffering is redeemed through the gaining of the heart's deepest desire" (128). Sarah Miles searches for meaning in a fallen world and finds her answer before the crucified Christ, while Mrs. May runs from the truth that haunts her until her encounter with God elicits a final

reckoning. Together, O'Connor and Greene reveal the physical and spiritual complexities of Christ's desire to be intimately connected with His creation.

Chapter 2: Vision in O'Connor's 'Good Country People'

In the short story, "Good Country People," published in 1955, O'Connor uses the grotesque to illustrate the problems posed by modern nihilism and atheism. The story portrays a young woman who has given up her Christian identity to embrace modern philosophy and is faced with a reality that requires her to reconsider the truth value of her world view. Ralph Wood's *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South* explains how O'Connor's "sacramental imagination" follows the biblical tradition, "from the concrete and the particular to the abstract and the universal (199-200). Wood continues, "[O'Connor] believed that the realm of 'what-is' is enveloped and irradicated not by 'what-is-not' but by the God who disclosed himself to Moses as Yahweh: He Who Is Who He Is" (200). O'Connor writes in the essay "The Novelist and the Believer," "The artist penetrates the concrete world in order to find at its depths the image of its source, the image of ultimate reality" (*MM* 157). It is in her rootedness in the concrete that O'Connor battles the nothingness of modern nihilism. Unpacking O'Connor's essay "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction" reveals O'Connor's beliefs about the connectedness of the visible and the invisible and how the novelist must "distort without destroying" to reveal "the beginning of vision" (*HB* 213-214). Unlike Hulga, the protagonist of "Good Country People," O'Connor's fiction reveals O'Connor's belief that the natural world is proof enough for the existence of God, and her stories rely on a strong appeal to the human senses to engage the reader with the reality of God. This "beginning of vision" places importance on the physical world as a means of uncovering the deeper mystery of the Incarnation; the "what-is" reflects the Creator and therefore offers insight into the being of God.

The conflict of O'Connor's "Good Country People" stems from the protagonist's quest for self-identity. Despite Hulga's thirty-two years and doctoral degree in philosophy, the narrator and Hulga's mother, Mrs. Hopewell, refer to Hulga as 'the girl.' After a hunting accident takes one of young Hulga's legs, the doctors inform Mrs. Hopewell that the girl also has a heart condition that will likely prevent her from living past the age of forty-five. Although Hulga appears capable of living independently, she lives with her mother, whom she openly resents. Hulga's actions are dichotomous; her education and name change point to her desire for independence, but she opts to live with her mother, wears childish clothing, and refrains from building relationships with her peers. Hulga's dependence on her mother suggests that Hulga's philosophy is far less liberating than she claims.

Hulga's childishness is foiled by Mrs. Freeman's daughters, Glynese who "has many admirers" and Carramae who is married and pregnant at fifteen. Mrs. Hopewell compares the Freeman girls and Hulga by noting that Hulga is brilliant but lacks common sense and then later telling Mrs. Freeman that "what she admired in those girls was their common sense" (*CS* 282). Mrs. Freeman prattles on about her girls' physical ailments, Glynese's sty and Carramae's pregnancy nausea, and how each of them seeks cures. The narrator notes Mrs. Freeman's morbid interest in the suffering of others: "Mrs. Freeman had a special fondness for the details of secret infections, hidden deformities, assaults upon children. Of diseases, she preferred the lingering or incurable" (275). Like their mother, Glynese and Carramae concern themselves with practical matters: chiropractic adjustments, cars, diet, etc. Hulga, however, lives disconnected with the physical world and hides herself in books of philosophy. Hulga's lack of worldly experiences, and her

mother's simple-mindedness and coddling, leaves her stuck between childhood and adulthood until she is faced with the incongruency of her ideas and beliefs. O'Connor omits much physical description of Hulga's appearance except Mrs. Hopewell's perspective that "if [Hulga] would only keep herself up a little, she wouldn't be so bad looking" (*CS* 275) and that Hulga's perpetual anger "obliterated every expression from her face" (273). Apart from her wooden leg, the most distinctive aspect of Hulga's appearance is her clothing; she wears "a six-year-old skirt and a yellow sweat shirt with a faded cowboy on a horse embossed on it" (276). Superficially, Hulga's outfit choice is a move to frustrate her mother, but beyond the conflict of the mother-daughter relationship, Hulga's clothes reveal Hulga's refusal to move from childhood into adulthood. Though she is thirty years old and holds a PhD, the narrator often refers to Hulga as "the girl" to emphasize Hulga's immaturity and the feigned innocence she employs to trap Manley Pointer. Except for her icy-blue eyes set behind a pair of glasses, to the reader, Hulga remains faceless. The missing details of her face invite the reader to personalize the protagonist and emphasize Hulga's inadequate understanding of her own identity, especially as she denies the most fundamental element of her identify as a child of God.

Hulga's apostasy during her education is a result of the shift from traditional philosophy that engages a community in the search for truth to the modernist philosophy that places emphasis on the self. Hulga rejects dialogue with her mother and her peers and spends most of her time lecturing and reading philosophy alone. When Hulga does spend time with her mother or Mrs. Freeman, she is critical and aloof. Hulga's response to her mother's complaint that she would prefer a more pleasant companion for her

errands, “If you want me, here I am – LIKE I AM” (*CS* 274), echoes God’s response to Moses’s question of God’s name: “I am who I am” (Ex. 3:14). The response reveals Hulga’s egocentric worldview as she has replaced belief in God with self-reliance and stubbornness as lifeless as her wooden leg. As soon as Hulga turns twenty-one, she distances herself from her family and her ties to Christianity, physically by moving away to pursue higher education and spiritually by changing her name from Joy to Hulga. The separation severs Hulga’s familial inheritance of her Christian identity and signifies Hulga’s rejection of the Christian virtues of joy and hope. In a 1956 letter to William Sessions, O’Connor clarifies that the story never claims Hulga has always been without faith but rather “it is implied that her fine education has got rid of it for her, that purity has been overridden by pride of intellect through her fine education” (*HB* 170). Here O’Connor highlights how society, specifically the world of academia, prompts Hulga’s deconversion to atheism and nihilism. The institution that should encourage discovery and knowledge cuts Hulga off from the richness of understanding the world as created by God.

The ugliness of Hulga’s chosen name more accurately portrays the spiritual reality of her inner desolation and dryness as she embraces the nihilism of modernity. Hulga believes changing her name to be “her highest creative act,” and in this way she subtly refers to herself as her own god. O’Connor personifies the name in Hulga’s perspective as “working like the ugly sweating Vulcan,” the god of fire (*CS* 275). The reference to the Greek god responsible for manufacturing the weapons of the gods highlights the defensiveness within Hulga’s character that exposes her insecurities in her belief system. Ironically, Hulga is irritated when Mrs. Freeman makes a point to use

Hulga's name when Mrs. Hopewell is absent: "It was as if Mrs. Freeman's beady steel-pointed eyes had penetrated far enough behind her face to each some secret fact" (275). Likewise, for Mrs. Hopewell, the name sounds like "the broad blank hull of a battleship" (274). Hulga's deliberately noisy entrance into the kitchen each morning with her wooden stump, her crossed arms as she waits for her breakfast, and the permanent unpleasant expression on her face are each part of Hulga's defense mechanism that protects the weakness of her nihilistic beliefs.

Mrs. Hopewell notes the gradual change in Hulga as her education strips Hulga of her faith. She observes that Hulga "was brilliant but she didn't have a grain of sense" and each year she notices Hulga becoming more "bloated, rude, and squint-eyed" (*CS* 277). O'Connor employs consistent references to vision and sight as clues to her character's ability to recognize truth. Hulga's philosophy degree creates a greater rift in her relationship with her mother, and from Hulga's perspective, it is her mother who fails to see. In a moment of unprovoked frustration, Hulga stands up in the middle of a meal with her mother and spews, "Woman! Do you ever look inside and see what you are not? God! … Malebranche was right: we are not our own light. We are not our own light!" (*CS* 276). Wood explains Hulga's allusion to Malebranche, a Cartesian philosopher who argued that knowledge of the world stems purely from human understanding rather than through experiences of sensation or imagination (201). Wood notes, "Malebranche's denial of the mind's ability to perceive truth through the natural order of things, together with his denial of secondary causes and thus of real human freedom, would make Hulga an idea disciple of so unsacramental a thinker" (201). Hulga's presumption of intellectual superiority over her mother, Mrs. Freeman, and Manley Pointer, the Bible salesman,

stems from her studies in philosophy rather than experience or reflection of the natural world. The isolating modern approach to philosophy intrenches Hulga in her nihilism, which causes her to become less attuned to physical reality. Hulga's reference to Malebranche ironically exposes her lack of understanding of Malebranche's theistic premise that although man cannot come to understandings through the material world, he must rely on "vision in God" to illuminate truth (201). Hulga's exclamation, "God!" further characterizes Hulga's disregard for God and serves as an answer to the basis of Malebranche's argument.

Understanding what Wood refers to as O'Connor's "sacramental imagination" is essential to unpacking the theology of her work, specifically the relationship between the material and spiritual realities. In *Naming Grace,* Mary Catherine Hilkert defines the sacramental imagination as one that "emphasizes the presence of the God who is self-communicating love, the creation of human beings in the image of God…the mystery of the incarnation" (as cited in Anderson). Sometimes called the Catholic imagination, the perspective relies on a closeness between God and creation and proposes that God intimately reveals Himself to his creation through the physical world. In other words, creation reflects the Creator. The Catholic Church teaches that "sacraments are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us. The visible rites…make present the graces proper to each sacrament" (*CCC* 1131). The seven sacraments of the Church rely on physical signs and symbols to communicate to man, who is body and soul, the spiritual reality of the graces he receives in the sacraments. The Catechism poetically counters Malebranche's assertion that man cannot come to know God through creation: "The material cosmos is so

presented to man's intelligence that he can read there traces of its Creator. Light and darkness, wind and fire, water and earth, the tree and its fruit speak of God and symbolize both his greatness and nearness" (*CCC* 1147). O'Connor's fiction, too, relies on tangible things and experiences to offer readers concrete perspective on grace as O'Connor believes the primary goal of the artist is to "penetrate the concrete world in order to find at its depths the image of its source, the image of ultimate reality" (*MM* 157). For O'Connor, this ultimate reality is the Incarnation, God made flesh. St. Athanasius's often quoted phrase, "God became man so that man might become God" offers the truth that O'Connor's fiction suggests – the Incarnation divinizes humanity so that man might begin to know God.

In "Blindness and the Beginning of Vision in 'Good Country People'" Elizabeth Hubbard analyzes the motifs of eyes and vision to explore Hulga's nearsightedness, both literally and spiritually. Hubbard concurs with Wood on O'Connor's critique of nihilism, but Hubbard also notes that Hulga ironically misreads Heidegger "so what Hulga takes from this passage is exactly what Heidegger is arguing against," which is, according to Hubbard, the narrow-mindedness of modern science in its concern only for what-is (53). As evidence for her claim, Hubbard cites O'Connor's marked copy of Heidegger's "What is Metaphysics?" and the Postscript that clearly notes Heidegger's essay does not support nihilism (54). Hubbard builds from Werner Brock's assertion that Heidegger's 'nothingness' is a necessary element of the human existence, especially as understood by Christians: "Far from being nihilistic or anti-religious, an interrogation of the nothing is particularly integral to a Christian understanding of being. Heidegger points out that Christian dogma 'bestows on the nothing a transformed significance, the sense of the

complete absence of beings apart from God: *ex nihilo fit-ens creatum*'" (from "What is Metaphysics?" 94). Heidegger argues that modern science strips the world of mystery by assuming everything there is to know is accessible to science. O'Connor repeatedly emphasizes the necessity of mystery throughout her letters and essays: "The type of mind that can understand good fiction is not necessarily the educated mind, but it is at all times the kind of mind that is willing to have its sense of mystery deepened by contact with reality, and its sense of reality deepened by contact with mystery" (*MM* 79). The mirroring of creation and its Creator and the Incarnation simultaneously reveal and veil the mysteries of God and the world. O'Connor suggests that Hulga's godless philosophy bars Hulga from the richness of both the physical and spiritual world. Mrs. Hopewell's observations of Hulga's transformation in college show that the more out of touch with reality Hulga becomes, the duller and more unexciting her life becomes. When Hulga accepts Pointer's invitation to a picnic, she forgets to bring the most obvious element, food, and she uses a menthol rub on her collar because "she did not own any perfume" (*CS* 284). Hulga's unchanging daily routine suggests that while she is alive, Hulga is by no means living a fulfilling life.

As noted by Ross Labrie, the Catholic imagination is fundamentally centered on reality, especially the reality of the incarnation. Labrie states that the incarnational focus for Catholic writers places special emphasis on the role of symbols because "...symbols convey an irreducible meaning inaccessible to other forms of discourse or expression" (15). The relationship between reality and symbolism, for O'Connor, is essential to the role of the artist, which is to uncover the mystery of human existence through an exploration of the natural world with one's senses (*MM* 101). O'Connor writes, "Fiction

begins where human knowledge begins – with the senses – and every fiction writer is bound by this fundamental aspect of his medium" (42). The symbol, then, operates on two levels: Firstly, the symbol is a literal and concrete detail, tangible to the senses, and secondly, the symbol offers insight to a deeper anagogical mystery, a spiritual reality that is invisible but just as real (42). In "Flannery O'Connor and the Symbol" John Desmond further expands on O'Connor's explanation of symbols as both literal and naturalistic: "The symbol, then, is literal, understanding literal to mean a concrete detail that points to or helps to reveal the essence of a thing or action, essence being its deepest and ultimately mysterious reality, which is linked to the sources of being itself" (148). O'Connor uses Hulga's wooden leg to illustrate her point:

> If you want to say the wooden leg is a symbol, you can say that. But it is a wooden leg first, and as a wooden leg it is absolutely necessary to the story. It has its place on the literal level of the story, but it operates in depth as well as on the surface. It increases the story in every direction, and this is essentially the way a story escapes being short. (*MM* 99-100)

O'Connor's sacramental imagination is evident in her use of Hulga's wooden leg as a symbol for the instability of Hulga's philosophical beliefs. Hulga relies on her wooden leg for support after her leg was shot in a hunting accident when she was ten years old. O'Connor offers the reader the gruesomeness and violence of the accident ("the leg had literally been blasted off") and highlights Hulga's capacity for remaining conscious throughout the traumatic event, captivating the imagination of Mrs. Freeman and the reader (*CS* 275). O'Connor invites the reader to consider Hulga's free will and her ability to make decisions for her life despite her traumatic childhood experience. The details of

Hulga's continued consciousness throughout the accident and her age offer the reader insight to the moment Hulga loses a piece of her innocence, foreshadowing Hulga's final loss of innocence when Pointer takes her artificial leg. The leg is equally necessary for Hulga to walk as the destruction of her nihilism is for Hulga's salvation. In this way the leg is literally and figuratively necessary for Hulga.

O'Connor creates layers of meaning for the wooden leg in its history and Hulga's relationship with the leg. Hulga loses one of her legs and is given something dead and removeable, an unnatural limb, as a replacement. Similarly, when Hulga pursues her doctoral degree, she rejects the natural inclination of the soul to search for God and adopts a philosophical nihilism. Kate Oliver argues that the false leg is symbolic of Hulga's false religion and connects O'Connor's description of the leg being "bound in a heavy material like canvas" with the binding of Hulga's philosophy books (*CS* 235). The leg's removability foreshadows the story's ending when Hulga is easily robbed of her artificial leg and her artificial beliefs.

Hulga intends to weaponize her philosophy against the unsuspecting Pointer using the guise of her wooden leg to feign vulnerability. Ironically, Hulga is unaware of Pointer's malicious motives, and she fails to acknowledge that her missing leg is a true source of insecurity. O'Connor writes, "...she was as sensitive about the artificial leg as a peacock about his tail" (*CS* 288). Hulga uses her leg as she does her name, to make others uncomfortable and to set herself apart from those her mother calls "good country people." Hulga intends to use her wooden leg, as well as her feigned innocence, to seduce the Bible salesman and annihilate his faith. O'Connor directs the reader to the leg's symbolic significance by comparing Hulga's treatment of the physical prosthetic with a person's

attention to their spiritual health: “She took care of it as someone else would his soul, in private and almost with her own eyes turned away” (288). Hulga’s avoidance of her leg and her hesitancy to reveal to Manley Pointer where her leg attaches to her knee exposes her spiritual blindness and her unwillingness to authentically search for the truth. Mrs. Hopewell says her daughter has “…the look of someone who has achieved blindness by an act of will and means to keep it” (273). Hulga’s refusal to see and be seen keeps her at a safe distance from communion and relationships, something Hulga finds necessary in preserving her worldview. It is precisely when Hulga allows Pointer to break through this barrier that she faces the consequences of her beliefs.

The numerous references to eyes and vision in the climactic scene between Hulga and Manley also work to converge the physical and spiritual realities of the story. As Hulga lies in the hayloft, she looks at the opening of the barn to the “cloudless and cold blue” sky and the landscape below (*CS* 287). The “cold blue” of the sky mirrors Hulga’s “icy-blue” and “round freezing-blue” eyes, hinting at the potential for change in Hulga (287, 289). She was once a believing Christian but her eyes, a window to her soul, reveal a frozen heart in need of thawing. As Manley begins kissing her, he removes her glasses when they get in his way. Hulga doesn’t even notice that he has taken her glasses as she continues to look out the opening “for she seldom paid any close attention to her surroundings” (287). This reiterates Hulga’s lack of concern for or awareness of the physical world. When Manley tells Hulga that he loved her from the first moment he saw her, she responds by stripping the word of its meaning: “In a sense...if you use the word loosely, you might say that. But it’s not a word I use. I don’t have illusions. I’m one of those people who see *through* to nothing” (287). Hulga reverses the incarnation, the

Word made flesh, by abstracting the word 'love.' While Hulga believes her philosophy has freed her from the illusions of Christianity, she has essentially blinded herself from seeing the truth of reality. For Hulga, it is easier to believe "we are all damned" than to wrestle with the mysteries of a veiled spiritual reality. Again, setting herself apart, she continues, "but some of us have taken off our blindfolds and see that there's nothing to see. It's a kind of salvation" (288). She is unable to see the physical landscape before her (and its grandeur), she mistakenly judges Manley Pointer to be naïve and juvenile, and she doesn't foresee the ramifications of others having the same beliefs as herself. Ironically, it is only when Manley removes her glasses, a symbol of her education, that she is able to see clearly.

O'Connor emphasizes the interconnection of the leg and Hulga's beliefs, her physical body, and her mind, at the climax of the story when Manley Pointer exposes his true intentions after Hulga has made herself vulnerable by showing him how to remove her wooden leg. Hulga offers Manley a level of trust as she allows him to handle her leg, and she momentarily considers a life with Manley where "every night he would take the leg off and every morning put it back on again" (289). This moment reveals in Hulga a longing for relationship and intimacy, even though she fends off relationships with others by her bitterness. When Manley sets the leg just out of Hulga's reach, she feels the weight of her dependency on Manley and loses her intellectual control: "Her brain seemed to have stopped thinking altogether and to be about some other function it was not very good at" (289). Hulga, though unaware, has been robbed of her false sense of stability as Manley takes both her leg and her philosophy. Unlike the ten-year-old

Hulga's ability to remain conscious during the hunting accident, Hulga is unable to make sense of what is happening to her because she has trained herself to see past reality.

Though Manley intends to manipulate Hulga, he hints at a truth about Hulga that catches her off guard. Manley gives Hulga "a long penetrating look" and tells her, "You ain't like anyone else" (*CS* 288). This look prompts movement in the depths of Hulga's being:

> There was nothing about her face or her round freezing-blue eyes to indicate that this had moved her; but she felt as if her heart had stopped and left her mind to pump her blood. She decided that for the first time in her life she was face to face with real innocence. This boy, with an instinct that came from beyond wisdom, had touched the truth about her...It was like losing her own life and finding it again, miraculously, in his. (289)

Manley's comment about Hulga's uniqueness contrasts Mrs. Hopewell's generalizations about "good country people" and suggests that her wooden leg sets her apart in a positive way. Hulga's response implies that she is unaccustomed to being seen. Manley uses the comment to manipulate Hulga, but his words offer truth about her personhood and causes movement within her soul. Typical in O'Connor's fiction, divine truth is revealed in the most unexpected character. The allusion to Matthew 16: 25, "For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it," emphasizes the paradoxical and radical Christian teaching that one must die to live. Hulga's exterior does not show any signs of change (her eyes remain the color of ice) but her "hoarse high voice" gives her away as Manley shakes from her sleeping soul the lifeless philosophy that had kept her soul dormant.

When Manley first begins to kiss Hulga, instead of a sensual experience, Hulga feels only pressure and an energy surge to her mind, but when Manley refuses to reattach Hulga's leg, she no longer feels intellectually superior to him and she is pinned with Manley's eyes, "like two steel spikes" (289). The disconnect between Hulga's intellect and body prevents Hulga from enjoying physical pleasure and from living a fulfilling life. Hulga represents the flaws of Manichean thought that would separate the body from the soul; she is unable to thrive in this divided state. O'Connor is careful to balance the importance of the body and soul, suggesting that both are essential elements of the human person.

The contents of Manley's briefcase serve as symbolic sacramentals for Hulga's reawakening to truth, ironically through Manley's deception. The flask of whiskey, the pack of pornographic playing cards, and the small box containing condoms, instead of signifying new life and an openness to grace, represent a perversion of the sacramentals of baptism, such as holy water and a white baptismal gown. Manley literally replaces the word of God with items associated with impurity and pleasure and places them in front of Hulga "like one presenting offerings at the shrine of a goddess" (*CS* 289). The items operate like matryoshka dolls as Manley exposes each layer of his character and the truth of his beliefs – the suitcase, hallowed out bibles, and the items within the bibles. These perverse sacramentals are the outward signs of the inner spiritual reality of Manley's soul.

The shocking revelation for Hulga is that Manley is more indoctrinated by the philosophy of nihilism than she is herself. When Hulga begins to understand that she had misjudged Manley's innocence, she responds with fear and anger. Hulga speaks to him

with a “pleading sound” in her disbelief, “Aren’t you...aren’t you just good country people?” (*CS* 290). Manley reminds Hulga of her belief in nothing as he easily pushes her back down, away from her leg. The night before Hulga daydreams of seducing Manley: “True genius can get an idea across even to an inferior mind,” she thinks (284). Though Hulga intends to seduce Manley physically using the power of her intellect, Manley dominates her intellectually and physically without much effort. O’Connor foreshadows Manley’s superiority at their meeting at the gate when Hulga is unable, at first, to see the “very tall” Manley and has the “furious feeling that she had been tricked” (284) and also when Manley poses the joke to Hulga “You ever ate a chicken that was two days old?” which she misinterprets as a philosophical question (282). Because Hulga’s philosophy focuses on the nothingness of the world, she is out of touch with reality and overestimates her power to transcend the material world and even her physical body. Hulga is more concerned with what-is-not, than the what-is.

Hulga boldly tells Manley that she doesn’t believe in God, but she unconsciously relies on Manley’s Christian beliefs for her own safety, just as she relies on her philosophy for her own sort of salvation. Wood uses the term “virginal nihilist” to refer to Hulga’s untested philosophy, which suggests that the moment Manley declares his nihilism is a kind of raping of Hulga’s beliefs (*CS* 208). Manley tells Hulga, “I hope you don’t think...that I believe in that crap! I may sell Bibles but I know which end is up and I wasn’t born yesterday and I know where I’m going” (290). “‘I’ll tell you another thing, Hulga,’ he said, using the name as if he didn’t think much of it, ‘you ain’t so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!’” (291). Manley is therefore the more extreme version of Hulga, claiming to never have believed in anything, travelling from

place to place with fake names and collecting items like glass eyes from each of his victims. In the moment of Hulga's helplessness, she draws from her mother's cliches about "good country people." Like the grandmother, Hulga relies on her attacker's sense of morality, one that she doesn't subscribe to herself. The grandmother insists that The Misfit only need to pray for Jesus's help, and Hulga accuses Manley of being a hypocritical Christian. Manley uses his guise as a Christian to manipulate woman while Hulga claims atheism but expects those around her to abide by Christian principles. The absurdity of Manley's character outshines Hulga's sullen immaturity and broken nihilism, and the wooden leg, which Manley packs into the briefcase between each of his hollowed-out Bibles, is taken from her. Hulga turns to look out the front of the barn once again and sees Manley's "blue figure struggling successfully over the green speckled lake" (291). This image of Manley as a Jesus figure, literally walking on water, signifies his role as Hulga's savior who ironically cures her vision by removing her glasses and propels her to move towards Truth by removing her leg. Through Manley's dishonesty and perversions, Hulga must acknowledge a moral and physical reality that her philosophy denies.

Like The Misfit in O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," Manley Pointer is a complex character who serves as villain and savior. Unlike Hulga, both The Misfit and Manley Pointer acknowledge the problem of the Incarnation in their lives and make the decision to live according to their own whims regardless. The men's use of violence disrupts the grandmother and Hulga's self-righteousness and forces the women to see beyond themselves. O'Connor relies on characters and violence to communicate the power of grace. O'Connor believes that the modern reader, like the grandmother and

Hulga, needs the shock of violence to be awakened to the spiritual reality, specifically the Incarnation. The unlikeliness of the stories' villains as the protagonists' saviors adds shock value to the moments of reversion towards God and illustrates the Jesuit teaching that God is in all things and works through all things.

A distinctive and often provoking element of O'Connor's realism is her use of the grotesque. O'Connor herself uses the term "grotesque" to describe her work the essay "The Grotesque in Southern Fiction." A succinct definition of the grotesque from *The Masters Review* states:

> The grotesque in literature focuses on the human body, and all the ways that it can be distorted or exaggerated: its aim is to simultaneously elicit our empathy and disgust. Very much like the uncanny, the grotesque draws its power from the combination of the familiar and the unfamiliar, or the familiar distorted.

For O'Connor, the grotesque involves a distortion of reality that in no way detracts from the humanness of her characters but rather draws the reader towards "mystery and the unexpected" and uncovers "the ultimate reaches of reality" (*MM* 40-41). O'Connor writes that because the fiction writer is bound by the senses, he must "use the concrete in a more drastic way" and this is the way of distortion (42). So, while a Bible salesman robbing a woman of her leg is not an everyday occurrence, O'Connor argues that her characters "have an inner coherence, if not always a coherence to their social framework" (*MM* 40). The "strange skips and gaps" in the grotesque draws the reader's attention to a truth beneath the surface (40). Evans's "A Sharp Eye for the Grotesque in Flannery O'Connor's 'Good Country People'" emphasizes the moral and spiritual meaning of O'Connor's use of the grotesque: "Whereas many recent authors have used the grotesque

merely to emphasize the ugly, absurd, bizarre, and seemingly pointless aspects of existence, O'Connor's use of such a style is always grounded in a vision of values by which she measures the shortcomings of modern life" (2). Evans argues that the grittiness of the grotesque works to rid O'Connor's fiction of sentimentality without encouraging nihilism.

According to O'Connor, the marriage of the concrete and the invisible must be "violent and comic" because it seeks to combine incongruities (*MM* 43). While the physical reality is visible and obvious, the spiritual reality is invisible, though just as real. The dramatic irony of the scene in the barn loft is both darkly humorous and serious. In one sense, Hulga utterly fails to seduce Manley with her intellectual powers because she is so completely out of touch with reality (thus her use of menthol rub as perfume). At the same time, the physical situation has dire possibilities, and O'Connor's tone suggests that Manley's position to rape Hulga physically is as threatening as his position to rape her intellectually. In this way, O'Connor uses Hulga and Manley to expose the "the ultimate reaches of reality" (40-41). The disjointedness of Hulga's body represents her piecemealed philosophy, and Manley's ability to easily strip her of her leg more importantly displays the incongruities of Hulga's worldview and reality. The shocking moment Manley reveals his intentions towards Hulga and leaves Hulga in the loft without her leg offers a physical representation of the reality of each character's soul; the invisible is made visible. Literally left without a leg to stand on and without her glasses, Hulga must rely on "what is" as she reconstructs her understanding of self, God, and the world.

After writing “Good Country People,” O’Connor wrote friend and mentor Caroline Gordon to share the story that she had completed in just four days, “the shortest I have written any thing in” (as cited in Gooch 254). O’Connor later shared that the story unfolded before her as she wrote: “I didn’t know he was going to steal that wooden leg until ten or twelve lines before he did, but when I found out that this was what was going to happen, I realized that it was inevitable. This is a store that produces a shock for the reader, and I think one reason is that it produced a shock for the writer” (Gooch 255). The moment Pointer reveals his true intentions is nearly unbelievable, yet the violence and the comedy of the encounter lead the reader to a deeper understanding of God and of grace. In her essay on the grotesque in Southern fiction, O’Connor recognizes the universal desire of storytellers and listeners for redemption, or at least the hope of restoration, within stories. The problem, O’Connor cites, is that the modern reader “has forgotten the price of restoration” (*MM* 49). In the case of “Good Country People” O’Connor reveals Hulga and Pointer to be freaks, capturing both Hulga’s physical deformity in her missing leg and Pointer’s mental perverseness in his collection of stolen items. The grotesque qualities of both characters draw the reader’s attention, and while the reader might presume the characters’ oddities create a safe distance between the reader and the fallenness of the characters, O’Connor uses her characters to show readers their own need for redemption. Though a reader might judge Hulga’s pride and feel satisfaction in her failure, at the end of the story, Hulga, more than any other character, is positioned toward the horizon.

O’Connor’s stories often carry biblical allusions and can be read as modern parables. "Good Country People” mirrors the story of the paralytic at Capernaum found

in the Gospel of Mark. The humble paralytic is lowered through a roof so that he might reach Jesus, who is surrounded by a great crowd. Hulga, in contrast, pridefully climbs up the ladder herself to the barn loft where she and Manley are completely alone. The contemptuous look that she offers Manley as she ascends the ladder emphasizes Hulga's self-reliance, her fatal flaw that exposes her need for communion. Jesus recognizes the faith of the paralytic and says to him, "Child, your sins are forgiven" (Mk 9:5). The man is child-like in his faith, whereas Hulga plays the child to manipulate Manley. When the scribes question Jesus's authority to forgive sins, he says to them, "Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, pick up your mat and walk'?" and then Jesus heals the paralytic who stands and walks. The spiritual redemption offered to the paralytic is manifested in the healing of his physical body. Manley, the twisted Jesus figure, also recognizes the trace of faith in Hulga, despite her attempt to believe nothing. Hulga can change her name but not her identity. Even Manley recognizes belief in Hulga, though she denies it.

O'Connor uses physical details to communicate Hulga's interior disposition after this encounter with Manley. As Manley leaves the barn loft, "the girl was left, sitting on the straw in the dusty sunlight. When she turned her churning face toward the opening, she saw his blue figure struggling successfully over the green speckled lake" (*CS* 291). The restoration happening inside Hulga's soul is suggested by the details of her "churning" face in the dusty sunlight. The change in Hulga is subtle but the imagery of the sunlight breaking through the dark loft of the barn and Manley as Jesus walking on water reveals the internal movement of Hulga's soul. The realism of Hulga's reversion is that it is sparked by an unlikely and uncomfortable moment that begins to clear Hulga's

vision. Similarly, Mark's Gospel says the paralytic "rose, picked up his mat at once, and went away in the sight of everyone. They were all astounded and glorified God, saying, 'We have never seen anything like this'" (9:12). While the Gospel writer emphasizes the role of vision in the conversion of the onlookers, O'Connor leaves the reader with the unchanged Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman.

In his biography of O'Connor, Gooch writes that O'Connor made few edits to the quickly drafted story. The most notable change made to the story is the addition of the closing scene with Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman. O'Connor begins "Good Country People" with an analogy between Mrs. Freeman's expressions and a "heavy truck," which paints Mrs. Freeman as a willfully stubborn and prideful woman (*CS* 271). Mrs. Freeman has black eyes that retreat and deaden when she is corrected so that she is no longer mentally present to the speaker. O'Connor writes, "Mrs. Freeman could never be brough to admit herself wrong on any point" (271). Similarly, Mrs. Hopewell believes herself to be superior to Mrs. Freeman. "Nothing had been arrived at by anyone that had not first been arrived at by her" (273). Though Mrs. Hopewell can sense the emptiness of Hulga's philosophy, she compartmentalizes her own faith and relies on a vague sense of doing good (such as inviting Manley Pointer to dinner) rather than submitting completely to the demands of Christianity. O'Connor returns to this theme of disingenuous faith in characters like the grandmother from "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," Mrs. May from "Greenleaf," and Mrs. Cope from "A Circle in the Fire."

In the final scene, O'Connor characteristically pans out from the stranded Hulga in the barn loft to offer the reader a wider vantage point. As they are pulling onions from the garden, Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman see Manley Pointer walking across the

meadow towards the highway. In their obliviousness, they comment on Manley being a "nice dull young man" who is "so simple" (*CS* 291). O'Connor returns to the analogy of Mrs. Freeman's vision as a truck: "Mrs. Freeman's gaze drove forward and just touched him before he disappeared under the hill" (291). The direction of the gaze of O'Connor's characters is a telling detail that reveals their inner disposition. In "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" the grandmother's redemption is evident in her smiling face tilted towards the sky. Mrs. Turpin in "Revelation" witnesses a vision of saints entering heaven as she looks up into the sky at the moment of her conversion. Unlike Mrs. Turpin, who also returns her gaze to farm work and continues to hear the heavenly chant of hallelujah, Mrs. Freeman "returned her attention to the evil-smelling onion shoot she was lifting from the ground" and remarks that she could never be that simple (291). Ironically, it is her perpetual focus on the ground, or the yellow line down the center of the road, that prevents Mrs. Freeman from seeing beyond her physical world. To explain the prophetic vision in her writing, O'Connor writes, "Prophecy is a matter of seeing near things with their extensions of meaning and thus of seeing far things close up" (*MM* 45). The opposite is true of Mrs. Freeman who can neither recognize the deviancy of Manley nor the evil within her own heart.

The contrast of Hulga's gaze towards the horizon, a symbol for the spiritual realm, and Mrs. Freeman's downward gaze at the onion suggests that Mrs. Freeman's soul is in more dire a state than Hulga's. The lukewarmness of Mrs. Freeman's "good country people" attitude presents a greater obstacle to genuine conversion than Hulga's blatant denial of Christianity. Revelation 3:16 says, "So, because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth." Mrs. Freeman's middle-of-the-

road perspective disables her from believing in anything at all, and her lack of imagination deadens her senses to the mystery that surrounds her. Like Hulga before her revelation, Mrs. Freeman is unaware of the spiritual realities and therefore cannot discern evil when it is directly in front of her or even within her grasp. Wynne writes, “The ironic or satiric writer uses his vision of what man ought to be to measure what he is. And from the light of that vision he tells us what we are: absurd and grotesque” (35). The bland Mrs. Freeman is blinded to the high drama of the human experience and remains unchanged at the end of the story. For Hulga, however, there is hope in redemption, because when Hulga is stripped of her false pretenses, she is able to see God, even in the most unlikely and grotesque character.

Chapter 3: The Sacramental Imagination and O'Connor's "A Temple of the Holy Ghost"

O'Connor scholar Mark Bosco concludes that in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" "O'Connor awakens the reader to the risks of taking seriously the words of Christian faith, to the transcendental stakes of the human condition, and to the theological hope that grace is lurking everywhere, especially where we least expect to find it" (64). One of O'Connor's most notorious characters, a murderous escaped convict, the Misfit from "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," tells the grandmother, "If [Jesus] did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow him" (*CS* 132). Just as these words open the grandmother's eyes to the demands of her Christian faith, the intersex person in O'Connor's "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" awakens for the story's protagonist, the mystery of man created in God's image: "God made me thisaway and I don't dispute it" (*CS* 246). While most of O'Connor's stories contain Southern Protestant characters, "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" is explicitly Catholic: After two teenage girls tell a twelve-year-old protagonist about the intersex person they see at the fair, a moment of revelation unfolds for the young Catholic during Eucharistic Adoration.

While O'Connor shies away from labeling herself a Catholic writer, she unapologetically recognizes that her writing is defined and informed by Catholic theology, specifically the theology of the Incarnation. Ironically, O'Connor relies on what she knows, the predominantly Protestant South, to tell her stories. To Betty Hester O'Connor writes, "Writers like myself who don't use Catholic settings or characters, good or bad, are trying to make it plain that personal loyalty to the person of Christ is imperative, is the structure of man's nature, his necessary direction, etc. The Church, as institution, doesn't come into it one way or another" (*HB* 290). O'Connor believed that

man is intimately tied to Christ because of his nature and that one can come to knowledge of Christ through an experience of reality and God's creation. What makes "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" distinctly Catholic is the Eucharist, "the source and submit of the Catholic Church" (*CCC* 1324). Christ's presence in the Eucharist is directly tied to the Incarnation; the mystery of God becoming man is reflected in the mystery of transubstantiation, when the bread and wine become the body, blood, soul, and divinity of Christ while retaining their physical attributes. It is the Eucharist, O'Connor says, that sets apart Catholics and Protestants (*HB* 341).

On the well-known story of O'Connor's response to Mary McCarthy's comment of the Eucharist as a great Catholic symbol, O'Connor elaborates in a letter to "A," "That was all the defense I was capable of but I realize now that this is all I will ever be able to say about it, outside of a story, except that it is the center of existence for me…" (*HB* 125). In the same letter, O'Connor identifies with the young girl in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" who believes in the true presence, and she cites that the story's ability to expand is due to "the mystery of the Eucharist in it" (124). The power of O'Connor's ability as a Catholic writer, lies in her portrayal and exploration of these deeply mysterious realities in her storytelling. For the protagonist of "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," the existence of the intersex person complicates the simplicity of her worldview, which is shaped by her Catholic upbringing. Her understanding of Catholic theology remains compartmentalized, and she struggles to show compassion towards the obnoxious guests and judges their dates. The girl's Catholic perspective and the overlapping of the words of consecration, "This is my body," with the words of the intersex person, "God made me thisaway," offers the reader an understanding of the

Eucharist that is simultaneously simple and complex, a paradox of the sacred and profane.

O'Connor professes the Incarnation to be the driving force in her work, as well as her devotion to her Catholic faith. O'Connor's emphasis on what can be experienced through the senses sets the groundwork for her characters' experience of the supernatural. Bosco states, "For O'Connor…the effect of the Incarnation is not a temporary blessing in history but a constant expansion into the material world of this human-divine revelation – the divine manifest in all creation" (60). It is this expansion that allows O'Connor's protagonist to understand the physical world through the framework of her Catholic faith. The mystery of the Eucharist is manifested in the intersex person, what Bishop Barron refers to as the "both/and" of Catholicism. In the introduction to *Vibrant Paradoxes: The Both/And of Catholicism* Barron illuminates the Church's dualities: "Grace and nature; faith and reason, Scripture and tradition; body and soul; God's immanence and God's transcendence: what the great Protestant theologian Karl Barth called 'that damnable Catholic "and"' is what I would call its vibrant paradox" (ii). Likewise, Henri de Lubac claims that paradox is fundamental to Christian theology: "Remember, after all, that the Gospel is full of paradoxes, that man himself is a living paradox, and that, according to the Fathers of the Church, the Incarnation is the supreme paradox" (as cited in Murphy 58). Salvation history hinges on the incarnation, and O'Connor's work seeks to draw readers into an experience with the mystery of this "both/and" that offers a perspective on Catholic theology not found in the writings of theologians.

Patrick Samway also marks the physical effect of God becoming man reflected in O'Connor's work: "Thus Catholic ideology at once embraces the world and renounces it,

as it seeks to go from the specific to the horizon of the eternal moment…the Incarnation is not a temporary blessing but a Christification of the world that render the human sacrosanct" (166). "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" suspends the reader, if just for a moment, between the apparent paradoxes that God became man, and that man is made in God's image and likeness. As cited in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, St. Thomas Aquinas explains man's sharing in the divine nature of God: "The only-begotten Son of God, wanting to make us sharers in his divinity, assumed our nature, so that he, made man, might make men gods" (460). O'Connor's fiction seeks to reveal the embedded mystery of the presence of God in his creation.

The medium of O'Connor's art is a fallen world invited to redemption through the incarnation. In a literal sense, O'Connor explores the great spiritual drama of man's fallen nature, sin, the incarnation, and redeeming grace through the liturgical framework provided by her Catholic faith. More than an artistic advantage or perspective, O'Connor argues that her Catholicity obliges her to create art that points to the mystery embedded in her beliefs: "When people have told me that because I am Catholic, I cannot be an artist, I have to reply, ruefully, that because I am a Catholic, I cannot afford to be less than an artist" (*MM* 146). O'Connor seeks to incarnate theological mystery through literary stories where sin and grace collide and the tension between good and evil is painfully exposed within the hearts of her characters.

O'Connor transfers the Church's teaching of the sacraments as visible signs of grace to her literature. Michael Murphy frames his argument for O'Connor's "literary sacramentality" (53) with a quote from Geroge Bernanos: "Because you do not live your faith, your faith has ceased to be a living thing. It has become abstract – bodiless. Perhaps

we shall find that the disincarnation of the Word of God is the real cause of all our misfortune" (51). O'Connor's fiction seeks to draw together the apparent disembodiment of nature and grace to create a more complete picture of reality. While O'Connor shies away from labeling herself a Catholic writer, she recognizes the centrality of her faith in her work. Rather than create a world romanticized by Christian ideas, O'Connor exposes the world as it really is. O'Connor writes, "[A] Catholic novel is not necessarily about a Christianized or Catholicized world, but simply that it is one in which the truth as Christians know it has been used as a light to see the world by" (*MM* 172). O'Connor's Catholic lens offers O'Connor access to a world unseen by non-believers, and O'Connor points out, "...people who think God is dead" (1955 Letter to 'A').

Murphy unifies the incarnation, sacramental and liturgical elements of O'Connor's work in what he calls the "aesthetics of consecration" (54). O'Connor's close attention to what is visible and what is unseen expands the reach of her fiction. Similarly, Mark Bosco's "Hillbilly Thomist: Understanding Catholic Literary Aesthetics in 'A Temple of the Holy Ghost'" holds that the three basic elements to O'Connor's literary aesthetic are the doctrine of the incarnation, the doctrine of sacramentalism, and a Christian, paradoxical view of reality (60-61). Bosco expands the Catholic meaning of the word 'transubstantiation' to explain the Church's understanding of 'substance' as "the underlying reality of a thing" (61). This helps to unpack the aim of O'Connor's sacramental imagination which recognizes the "Christ-hauntedness" of all creation. Of "The Temple of the Holy Ghost," Bosco writes:

> On the surface a humorous coming-of-age story, the narrative deepens into a moment of revelation in which the body of Christ, as the consecrated bread of

> Catholic eucharistic adoration, becomes the transcendent reality, that, paradoxically, holds together both the apparently secular body of an intersex person and the bodies of young girls as dwelling places of God's spirit, the Holy Ghost. (61)

The central elements of the story are bodies: "sexual bodies, martyred bodies, sacramental bodies" (61). The unitive force of bodies who carry the image and likeness of God and God Himself binds the story's themes of innocence, purity, suffering, human nature, and the power of God.

Because "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" is O'Connor's only story that features a Catholic protagonist and explicitly references Catholic doctrine, it is important to distinguish how O'Connor's sacramental imagination sets her apart from Protestant writers. Citing David Tracy's *The Analogical Imagination*, Bosco expands on the differences between the Catholic language of faith, called analogical language, and the Protestant language of faith, called dialectical language:

> The Catholic, analogical imagination tends to understand the presence of God as immanent in the world through the analogies of created things, implying that knowledge of God can be discovered in human interaction, in ritual and metaphor. The Protestant, dialectical imagination tends to understand God as totally transcendent, absconded from a sinful world, which implies that God can be discovered only by negation and absence, in the complete difference between divine and human. (59)

The analogical imagination emphasizes the here and now of Christ's presence in the world, a God intimately involved in the most minute details of His creation. Analogical

language reveals a God who remains physically present in a fallen world in the form of bread and eliminates all distance between God and man.

The opening sentence of O'Connor's "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" is compacted with the theological truth that provides the framework for the theme of the story: "All weekend the two girls were calling each other Temple One and Temple Two, shaking with laughter and getting so red and hot that they were positively ugly, particularly Joanne who had spots on her face anyway" (*CS* 236). The pubescent girls can hardly contain themselves after Sister Perpetua, "the oldest nun at the Sisters of Mercy," attempts to teach the girls a lesson in purity. Should the girls find themselves in a situation where a man is behaving "in an ungentlemanly manner" they are to say, "Stop sir! I am a Temple of the Holy Ghost!" (238) The phrase comes from 1 Corinthians 6:19 where Paul writes, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?" In other words, the human body is sacred because the Holy Spirit resides in the body, and any affront to the dignity of the body, is an offense against God. The girls' mother sends Joanne and Susan to Mount St. Scholastic in hopes that the sisters will "keep a grip on their necks" and curb their obsession for boys. However, the girls' response to Sister's lackluster advice on purity exposes their lack of confidence in the old woman's worldly experience, and they strut around the house in high heels, talking about boys and admiring their legs. When the protagonist's mother reiterates to the girls that they are in fact "Temples of the Holy Ghost" they attempt to conceal their giggles and look "with astonished faces as if they were beginning to realize that she was made of the same stuff as Sister Perpetua" (238). While Sister Perpetua's advice seems fitting from her perspective as a religious sister, the

girls can hardly believe a lay woman could endorse the same view. Bosco notes that here "O'Connor creatively puts the comedy of sexual awakening into tension with a deeply Catholic theological theme of the body as temple – humanity made in the image and likeness of God" (62). The fourteen-year-olds miss the significance of the phrase and dismiss it as meaningless and outdated Catholic rhetoric.

The protagonist, a twelve-year-old girl, responds to the girls' story with a spiritual reflectiveness that sets her apart from the older girls. Though she does not completely understand its meaning, she is "pleased with the phrase" because "it made her feel as if somebody had given her a present" (238). She is struck by the revelation that she is the dwelling place of God, yet she persists in her moral religiosity. Intermixed in this opening scene, the girl points out Joanne and Susan's stupidity and girlishness. The girl's judgmental jokes about Miss Kirby's elderly admirer, Mr. Cheatam, and Alonzo Myers, an eighteen-year-old, overweight hired cab driver, show that the girl's vice of pride might have deeper roots than Joanne and Susan's superficiality. Her biting criticism of others contrasts with brief moments of recognition that "[Miss Kirby] is a Temple of the Holy Ghost, too" (239). O'Connor subtly introduces the primary tension in the story through the underlying question of what it means to be a temple of the Holy Spirit and its ramifications should this be true.

The child's suggestion to her mother that she invite the Wilkinses boys to accompany the cousins to the fair introduces another layer of theology on the Incarnation and adds to the characterization of the girl and her Catholic, critical perspective. The girl tells her mother that the boys are "going to be Church of God preachers because you don't have to know nothing to be one" (*CS* 239) to insinuate that the boys are simple-

minded and do not pose a threat to the cousins. The girl creates a narrative in her imagination that places her above the boys and her cousins. In her daydreams of saving the boys from Japanese suicide divers and rejecting marriage proposals from both of the boys, the girl establishes a sense of superiority to the boys, intellectually, physically, and sexually. The girl also manipulates her cousins by piquing their interest with descriptions of edgy and physically mature men who drive a car "with a squirrel tail on the front" (239). The underlying tension between the cousins and the girl tightens as Susan asks, "How does a child like you know so much about these men?" (239) When the boys arrive, the girl spies on the group from the bushes; she attempts to conceal the innocence of her curiosity and lack of worldly experience to maintain her superiority. The narrator's description of the "short thin boys with red faces and high cheekbones and pale seed-like eyes" sitting on the banisters "like monkeys" and one boy with a "dog-like" expression creates an image of the sixteen-year-olds as non-threatening and unintelligent boys.

O'Connor distinguishes the boys' Protestantism from the girls' Catholicism with a side-by-side comparison of hymns. One boy plays the harmonica while the other strums the guitar, and the girl notes that the "hillbilly song...sounded half like a love song and half like a hymn" (*CS* 240). Far from being impressed, the girls can hardly contain their laughter, and they interrupt the boys to sing Aquinas's *Tantum Ergo*. The mood of the scene changes as the boys' expressions shifts from "dog-like" and "loving" to "fierce and startled" (240, 241). O'Connor paints the sky "a bruised violet color" that contrasts with the boys' "dark red" faces (241). After a moment of silence at the conclusion of the song, Wendell breaks the solemn mood with the curt statement "That must be Jew singing," and the girls return to their giggling. The scene triggers a strong reaction from the child:

she stomps her foot and shouts, “You dumb ox!” and “You dumb Church of God ox!” before running away. O’Connor employs the well-known nickname for St. Thomas Aquinas in the girl’s outburst towards Wendell. In his biography of St. Thomas Aquinas, C. K. Chesterton explains that the young Thomas Aquinas’s large stature and academic humility led his peers to refer to him as “the Dumb Ox,” noting both his dullness and apparent dumbness (48). References to Aquinas’s biography are scattered throughout O’Connor’s stories; the protagonist in “The Comforts of Home” shares the saint’s name and chases a naked woman out of his room, just as Aquinas purportedly used a fire poker to ward off a prostitute. The irony of Aquinas’s ill-fitting nickname used by the girl in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” emphasizes the girl’s pridefulness in her moral superiority, especially in her intellectual understanding of Catholicism. At the same time, O’Connor seems to argue that the girl’s intellectual understanding of her faith prepares her for a profound encounter of love.

O’Connor’s selection of Aquinas’s prayer *Tantum Ergo* is significant because it is the hymn sung at Benediction, the adoration of the Eucharist. The typical context of the prayer, which the child is aware of, is the solemn setting of a Catholic church, where the congregation kneels before a monstrance holding the Eucharist, a consecrated host that has become, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church states, “the body, blood, soul, and divinity of Jesus Christ” (*CCC* 1374). The boys’ evangelical hymns, “The Old Rugged Cross” and “I’ve Found a Friend in Jesus,” communicate a safe and comfortable relationship with Jesus. “On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross/ The emblem of suffering and shame,” the opening lines of “The Old Rugged Cross,” point to a cross that is empty and distant. The speaker sees the cross as a symbol of pain that has been

endured, which contrasts with the Catholic understanding of the re-presentation of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross at the Mass. In the Mass, Catholics are called to journey with the Lord to the cross in the sacrament. The focal point of most Catholic Churches is the tabernacle in the front center of the church, and just above the tabernacle is a large crucifix, which serves as a constant reminder of Christ's suffering on the cross. The nails through Christ's hands and feet, the lacerations across the body, the crown of thorns pressed into His head, and the open wound on Christ's side from the soldier's lance offer a visual to Christ's words in the Gospel of Luke: "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it" (9:23-24). The demand of Christianity is startlingly clear – the journey to salvation is one that requires a crucifixion of self.

The child specifies the Wilkins boys' affiliation to The Church of God in her name-calling to criticize their evangelical hymns and their dismissal of *Tantum Ergo* as "Jew singing" (*CS* 241). Bosco notes that the hymns, "I've Got a Friend in Jesus" and "The Old Rugged Cross" center on "personal righteousness and witness to Jesus – classic ingredients of what Tracy calls 'dialectical imagination' of faith" (62). The Latin hymn, however, employs the anagogical imagination as it expresses the mystery of the Eucharist that appears to be a piece of bread to the human senses but in reality is "the whole Christ…truly, really, and substantially contained" (*CCC* 1374). Wendell, unable to appreciate the solemnity of the chant or comprehend the Latin, associates the Catholic hymn with the Jewish faith, which Bosco points out is as marginalized a community in

the Protestant South as Catholicism (62). The boys' lack of understanding verifies the girl's earlier criticism of the superficiality of their theology.

While the child intellectually understands the necessity of suffering for one's sanctification, as well as the incomprehensive reality of God's presence in the Eucharist, her tragic flaw, like many of O'Connor's religious characters, is the disconnect between her intellectual faith and her heart. Her twelve-year-old honesty admits that she "was a born liar and slothful and sassed her mother and was deliberately ugly to almost everybody" and that "she was eaten up by the sin of Pride" (*CS* 243). This admittance of sinfulness sets her apart from characters like Mrs. May in "Greenleaf" or the grandmother in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." In Ralph Wood's *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South*, Wood writes, "The story's precocious young protagonist thus makes the two gifts that one cannot possibly earn or deserve – native intelligence and religious faith – into a cause for spiritual pride. She is, in fact, a little monster of presumption" (245). In true O'Connor fashion, the girl who longs for sainthood decides that "she could never be a saint, but she thought that she could be a martyr if they killed her quick" (*CS* 243). Like so many Christians in O'Connor's work, the child wants to circumvent the most necessary step towards the resurrection, the crucifixion.

The opposing characteristics are stacked up against each other in the girl's daydreams about martyrdom. The girl recognizes the beauty of sainthood and is attracted to the stories of the saints who endured persecution to the point of death by the Romans in the early years of the Church. The imagery of the girl wearing tights and standing in the golden glow of "Christians hanging in cages of fire" above the arena subtly evokes the circus tents at the fair, setting the reader up for the story of the "freak" at the fair. The

girl's pride and youth romanticize her daydream so that the lions in the colosseum fall to her feet, converted by her holiness, not unlike the lions in the Old Testament story of Daniel. When the Romans try to burn her, the girl remains unharmed and "finding she was so hard to kill, they finally cut off her head very quickly with a sword and she went immediately to heaven" (*CS* 243). While the girl recognizes the necessity of suffering for one's redemption, her humanity searches for the easiest path, the path that involves the least amount of discomfort. O'Connor seems to suggest that intellectual faith is important only insofar as it produces visible fruit in one's life. The Baltimore Catechism, which would have played a key role in O'Connor's own catechesis as a young girl, asks the question 'Why did God make you?' to which the book offers the answer, "To know, love, and serve God in this life…" Until the girl encounters Christ's love in a personal moment of conversion, the girl's knowledge of her faith inflates her pride and distances her from her peers.

The girl's prayer life also speaks to both her faith and her pride. In faithfulness, or perhaps a sense of obligation, the girl kneels next to her bed and takes "a running start" to make it through the Apostle's Creed, a prayer that lists the core teachings of the Catholic Church, again emphasizing the girl's knowledge rather than her personal relationship with Christ. The narrator describes the girl's prayer life as inconsistent and somewhat mindless, yet still prompted by grace: "…sometimes for no reason at all, [the girl] would be moved to fervor and would think of Christ on the long journey to Calvary, crushed three times on the rough cross. Her mind would stay on this a while and then get empty…" (*CS* 244). Unlike Mrs. May from "Greenleaf" and the grandmother in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," the girl in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" is primed in her prayer

for the revelation she receives at the story's climax. Her mind knows God before her heart consents to genuine faith. While certainly imperfect, the girl's foundational understanding of Christ's suffering leads her to a deeper understanding of the implication of the cross in her worldview. The contradiction in the girl's behavior exposes O'Connor's self-awareness in her own sinfulness and the difficulty of attaining sainthood.

The descriptions of the fair foreshadow the girl's experience during benediction and propel the girl towards her the convergence of the Eucharist and the circus freak. From her dark room, a light from the window invites the girl to look "past the wall of woods…where a long finger of light was revolving up and around and away, searching the air as if there hunting for the lost sun" (*CS* 243). When O'Connor directs the focus of her protagonists past the horizon or beyond the woods, she means to address the heavenly realm. Here the fair's beacon light becomes a symbol for the light of truth; the finger of God beckons the girl to a deeper understanding of her faith, one that requires an uncomfortable intimacy. The imagery is reminiscent of Michelangelo's "The Creation of Adam" and God's finger reaching out to touch Adam or Jesus directing doubting Thomas's finger to the open wound in his side, both images shed light on the intimacy of God's relationship with man.

The girl sees in her head "all the tents raised up in a kind of gold sawdust light and the diamond ring of the Ferris wheel going around and around up in the air and down again and the screeking merry-go-round going around and around on the ground" (*CS* 242). The mesmerizing circular patterns and the dazzling light create a heavenly trance for the girl. In the chapter "Breaking Bodies" Michael P. Murphy notes that the

"liturgical shape of O'Connor's fiction...where circles are drawn around the sacred and then exploded to reveal a unique power...reveal[s] the paradox that resides at the dramatic heart of her theological aesthetics" (54). Later in the article, Murphy traces the "nurturing geometry" of the "lines and circles (but mostly circles) [that] become the elements that signal and bear the literary freight of transformative moments" (67). The imagery evoked by the circus parallels the swinging circular motions of the thurible as the priest blesses the Blessed Sacrament in the monstrance during Benediction. The flames of the candles illuminate the incense to create the kind of "gold sawdust light" of the tents. O'Connor draws attention to the sacredness of the profane; the irreverent display of a person's body is full of the potential to 'explode' with deep theological truth.

O'Connor introduces the heart of the mystery with the introduction of the intersex "freak" from the fair, the "answer to a riddle that was more puzzling than the riddle itself," according to the child (*CS* 245). When the cousins return home from the fair giggling and gossiping about the intersex person they saw, the child's curiosity is aroused. The cousins tell the girl she is too young to know about such things, but she outsmarts them by enticing them with a story of a rabbit giving birth. The child is stumped by the cousin's account of the intersex person who was "a man and woman both" (245). Oddly enough, the imaginative child thinks this person must have two heads to be both man and woman, overlooking the obvious genital condition described by the cousins when "it" lifted up their dress. When Joanne asks about the rabbit, the child tells the girls it spit its babies out of its mouth. The child's focus on the head rather than sexual organs, even in the case of the rabbit, conveys her innocence and the dominance of her intellect.

As the child tries to make sense of the intersex person, she is unable to imagine the person's face, but she places the scene from the cousin's story into the context of a church. Again, the girl uses her faith to understand the world, but the intersex person does not fit nicely into her compartmentalized perception of types of people. The girl hears the person say, "God made me thisaway and I don't dispute it...God done this to me and I praise Him...Raise yourself up. A temple of the Holy Ghost. You! You are God's temple, don't you know?" and the people respond, "Amen. Amen" (*CS* 246). Ironically, the simple-minded cousins bring two ideas to the girl that seem to contradict – that God dwells within man and the existence of the intersex person. The girl easily transfers the temple analogy to Miss Kirby, the schoolteacher who lives with the girl and her mother, but the intersex person challenges the girl's understanding of man created in God's image. The daydream of the intersex person in the church is the invert of the girl's later experience in Benediction when the Host becomes for the girl the embodiment of what she was unable to see in her mind – the temple of the Holy Spirit in the intersex person.

In the moments leading up to the story's climax, O'Connor continues to employ lines and circles to connect the intersex "freak" of Saturday to the consecrated Host of Sunday. The journey of this connection, in true O'Connor form, is both physical and spiritual. During the car ride to the convent the girl moodily sits as far away from Susan and Joanne as she can and distances herself from the "twaddle" by sticking her head out the window. While the child's "ugly thoughts" about the driver's body odor reveal the hostility in her soul, her physical body moves closer and closer to the Eucharist as the car nears the convent. O'Connor employs the sun as a symbol to foreshadow the child's revelation in the presence of the Eucharist. In the car, the girl's hair blows across her face

obstructing her view of the "ivory sun" enough that she can look at it directly. The irony here is that the girl is unable to fully appreciate the radiance of the sun because its rays are too intense for the human eye, but she is, however, able to gaze upon the Eucharist unblinkingly.

The scope of the girl's vision, again both physical and spiritual, narrows as the lines and circles of the narrative lead the girl to the Eucharist. The convent, "a red brick house...set in the center of town" is situated between a gas station and a firehouse (*CS* 247). The "high black grillework fence" and the "polished corridor" create strict lines that give way to the "springing arches" that funnel the girl towards the ultimate center. The girl's sarcastic thoughts ("You put your foot in their door and they got your praying") fade into prayer sometime during the *Tantum Ergo*, which is sung at the beginning of benediction when the Eucharist is placed in the monstrance. The theological explosion occurs when the girl's mechanical prayers subside, leaving room for the work of grace. At this moment, the narrative focuses on an exact point:

> Her mind began to get quiet and then empty but when the priest raised the monstrance with the Host shining ivory-colored in the center of it, she was thinking of the tent at the fair that had the freak in it. The freak was saying, 'I don't dispute hit. This is the way He wanted me to be. (247-248)

Once again, the arms of the priest, the gold rays that surround the monstrance, and the circular Host are the lines and circles of this liturgical equation that has but one solution. In two sentences O'Connor both complicates and simplifies the mystery of the Eucharist. In one sense Susan and Joanne's story of the hermaphrodite causes confusion for the girl. How can a person be both male and female? In the same way, the girl begins "to realize

that she was in the presence of God" though her vision deceives her. Near the middle of the *Tantum Ergo* are the words (translated from Latin): "Faith will tell us Christ is present, when our human senses fail." Both realities seem to break the rules of nature.

The second layer of significance to the overlapping of the Host, consecrated during the Mass with the words "This is my body...," and the words from the hermaphrodite, "This is the way He wanted me to be" is the fundamental Catholic teaching of man's identity. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states, "It is in Christ, 'the image of the invisible God,' that man has been created 'in the image and likeness' of the Creator. It is in Christ, Redeemer and Savior, that the divine image, disfigured in man by the first sin, has been restored to its original beauty and ennobled by the grace of God" (para. 1701). The semblance of the Creator in His creation, despite man's disfigurement by sin, makes man beautiful and holy. In a moment of grace, the judgmental girl recognizes the presence of God in the outlier of society, the "freak," and in the Eucharist. Faith and belief converge as the girl's recognition of the spiritual reality of the Eucharist informs her perception of the physical world. O'Connor writes in a December 1959 letter to Cecil Dawkins, "The Church's vision is prophetic vision; it is always widening the view" (*HB* 365). While the girl's vision narrows to the Eucharist, her understanding of the Body of Christ, extends beyond the Eucharist and Catholics like herself to include the marginalized.

The motif of the *Imago Dei* or image of God in man is reinforced by the girl's experience with the "moon-faced" nun immediately after benediction: "...the big nun swooped down on her mischievously and nearly smothered her in the black habit, mashing the side of her face into the crucifix hitched onto her belt" (*CS* 248). Although

the girl's revelation before the monstrance comes without force, in true O'Connor fashion, the girl does not escape the violent force of grace. O'Connor writes, "This notion that grace is healing omits the fact that before it heals, it cuts with the sword Christ said He came to bring" (*HB* 354). The diction in this passage ("swooped," "mischievously," and "mashing") places the nun in a position of power over the girl. On entering the convent, the girl had evaded the nun's embrace with a hostile frown and cold handshake, but now the nun pulls the girl into her body so that the crucifix of the nun's rosary is impressed upon her face. The moment ends as the nun, still holding the girl, looks into her eyes. The nun sees the mark of the crucifix on the child's face; she literally sees Jesus in the child. The girl's experience leaves a physical mark on her body where she came face to face with Christ on the cross. The girl feels the reality of the Crucifixion in her body.

As O'Connor herself outlines in a letter to "A," "…when the nun hugged the child, the crucifix on her belt was smashed into the side of the child's face, so that one accepted embrace was marked with the ultimate all-inclusive symbol of love" (*HB* 124). This experience of intimacy with the nun and the uncomfortable marking of the crucifix, challenges the child's romanticized imagined martyrdom. The distance that the girl creates in her life to keep her safe from those who are different from her, whether in their experiences, beliefs, or appearances, disappears with the nun's embrace. Love does not manifest itself in a single moment of courage for one whose heart is bitter. The image of the crucified Christ serves as a reminder that the call to holiness and the pathway to sainthood is messy in a fallen world. O'Connor's repeated emphasis on the body demands a recognition of the necessity of suffering. She writes:

> For me it is the virgin birth, the Incarnation, the resurrection which are the true laws of the flesh and the physical. Death, decay, destruction are the suspension of these laws. I am always astonished at the emphasis the Church puts on the body. It is not the soul she says that will rise but the body, glorified. (*HB* 100)

For the Catholic girl, the body of Christ is the crucified Christ. The mangled, bleeding body hanging on the cross is God incarnate. So, in this way, the question of suffering is answered in an image, the crucifix.

On the car ride back to the girl's home, a subtle shift in the mood solidifies the interior change of the child. Serenely, the child sits in the back of the car with her mother and her "round face" looks out across the green pastures. The blinding brightness of the sun has diminished as it sets across the sky: "The sun was a huge red ball like an elevated Host drenched in blood and when it sank out of sight, it left a line in the sky like a red clay road hanging over the trees" (*CS* 248). The simile of the sun as the bloody Host reveals how the girl continues to see the world through her Catholic lens, but her vision has been adjusted to align with the truest reality of the world, which is the spiritual reality. The mindless prayers and silly daydreams conjured in the darkness of her bedroom are expelled by a temporal understanding of the Incarnation and Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Bosco writes, "The story suggests, literally, that God is to be encountered – embodied – in the freak, the stranger, the alienated" (64). The child's abstract and romanticized faith is grounded in the body of the intersex person.

O'Connor directs criticism towards Protestantism at the end of the story when Alonzo tells the child's mother that after inspecting the fair, preachers from town requested that the police shut it down a week early. Wood argues that the child "is not

offended by this hybrid creature with this strange creed" because her Catholic faith highlights the beauty of the crucified Christ, even in its gore. The Protestant preachers, however, are scandalized by the sexually embodied person who accepts his deformity as the will of God. The most unlikely character, the "freak," also embodies the kind of faith that sees beyond the reality of the physical world. Despite the brokenness of their body, the intersex person's recognition of their incorporeal soul offers them moral freedom beyond the restrictedness of his deformities (Wood 247). The child hears about the intersex person and approaches the mystery in prayer, while the Protestant preachers are scandalized by them and miss the mystery of the person's suffering. This difference ties back to "The Old Rugged Cross" hymn and the cleanliness of a distant and unoccupied cross. The crucifix is central to the anagogical imagination because it hides nothing; it is the scandalous image of God in flesh suffering the consequence of sin.

O'Connor's "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" illustrates the power of Christ's Incarnation and the pervasiveness of grace in a fallen world. Romans 5:20 states, "The law entered in so that transgression might increase but, where sin increased, grace overflowed all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through justification for eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." The deformities of the intersex person's body and the pridefulness of the girl's soul each reveal a need for salvation. O'Connor's analogical imagination situations the depth of human sin in the light of grace to show the closeness of suffering and redemption. Even the title of the story, "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," pulls together the temporal and the spiritual. The story centers on the body, the Eucharist, and the crucifix. Bosco concludes his essay on his approach to teaching O'Connor's "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" by noting the story's

importance among her collection: “We are given a vision of reality that is steeped in the faith and intellectual heritage of Catholicism. The better we understand this vision, the better we understand the artistry of O’Connor” (64). The closing imagery of the sun as a bleeding host setting across the horizon offers the perfect example of O’Connor’s Catholic imagination and the sacramental reality that all of creation is holy. As the only story that explicitly incorporates Catholic imagery, “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” can deepen readers’ experience with O’Connor’s fiction and the mystery embedded in her stories.

Chapter 4: Bishop & O'Connor: Seeing and Believing

Though Elizabeth Bishop and Flannery O'Connor never met face to face, the two authors express, through their lives, letters, visual art, and writing, the absolute necessity of sight for one's assertion of faith. Bishop employs subtle sacramental language within her poetry to explore the secular world through a worldview that is shaped by what Laurel Corelle refers to as Bishop's "religious inheritance" ("Literary Tradition" 496). Bishop's lifelong attraction to Christianity, which is evident in her writing, is held in check by an equally consistent strain of doubt. In "Reading Elizabeth Bishop as a Religious Poet," Cheryl Walker writes, "To read Bishop's work from a religious perspective is to find not expressions of absolute faith but a mind engaged with the problems of faith" (167). The startling moments of grace in O'Connor's fiction, a woman gored in the heart by a bull; an elderly man assaulted by a young child; and a woman hit in the face with a book, however, leave little room to doubt the reality of God. A side-by-side close reading of Bishop, an agnostic, and O'Connor, a Catholic, offers readers a deeper understanding of each author's craft and purpose. Bishop's writing presents a question that is rooted in the visible world; O'Connor proposes an inescapable solution. A comparison of O'Connor's "Revelation" with Bishop's "The Moose" emphasizes the precision of detail in O'Connor's fiction that is both grounded and transcendent. O'Connor's moments of revelation alter her characters' ability to see, which have a lasting impact on their physical and spiritual awareness.

The fundamental role of vision in Bishop and O'Connor's writing is emphasized by both writers' hobbies in visual art. Marianne Boruch, in "O'Connor Plus Bishop Plus Closely Plus Distance," offers that the "thrilling fact that both were also visual artists

isn't a door, but a key to a door that opens up their method" (561). The artists' artwork offers clues to how each sees the world. Boruch notes the different approaches by each author: O'Connor creates her cartoons with a sharp tool and linoleum blocks while Bishop uses brushes, watercolor, and gouache in her work. The black and white contrast of O'Connor's cartoons is akin to the striking imagery and clear perspective of the narration in O'Connor's fiction. Bishop's wobbly lines and imperfect sceneries offer a more subtle perspective of humanity in the world. The visual work of both artists offers insights into each's approach to perspective, movement, and contrast in their written work.

Like her fiction, O'Connor's black and white cartoons feature exaggerated caricatures and O'Connor's cutting, wry humor. The hard lines of O'Connor's cartoons during her time at the Georgia State College for Women pair human interactions with satirical messages on anti-intellectualism and pretentiousness, focusing mostly on the typical experiences of students. The emphasis of vision in O'Connor's fiction is first refined in her cartoons. O'Connor began drawing cartoons when she was five years old, displaying even at an early age a mature and independent perspective. It is not difficult to see the similar style of the bold descriptions of O'Connor's characters and those depicted in her cartoons: a mother's face that is "broad and innocent as a cabbage" (*CS* 117), a boy with "eyes like two steel spikes" (*CS* 288), and a woman with eyes "gray and sharp like the points of two icepicks" (*CS* 510). The precision and directness of O'Connor's art parallels the intensity of O'Connor's perspective of her vocation as a writer and the theology that permeates her fiction.

Likewise, an analysis of Bishop's visual art offers insight to the often-inconclusive observations Bishop portrays in her poetry. Bishop's art often uses bold and imperfect lines to portray scenes, such as *Interior With Extension Cord*, *Brazilian Landscape*, and *Olivia*. O'Connor's uses the analogy of a child drawing to explain storytelling: "When a child draws, he doesn't intend to distort but to set down exactly what he sees, and as his gaze is direct, he sees the lines that create motion…They are lines of spiritual motion" (*MM* 113). Rather than a mirrored image of reality, the perspective Bishop offers through her art draws attention to movement. Boruch proposes that the line of the extension cord which runs up the walls and across the ceiling of the room in Bishop's *Interior With Extension Cord* is both playful and haunting, "outrageous and out of reach" (563). The thick black cord moves the eye across the painting, from the outlet to the lamp, and over the doorway that opens to an impressionistic flowering bush. The lines of the paneling on the walls and ceiling, the floorboards, the stools and side tables, and the painting on the wall create linear motion that complicates the simplicity of the scene. The most distinct line of the cord keeps the viewer's eyes inside the mostly black and white room, even though a colorful and organic world waits just outside the doorway. Similarly, in Bishop's "The Moose," Bishop keeps the reader inside the bus so that the walls of the bus present a physical boundary between the passengers and the moose.

The inclusivity of Bishop's poetry is hinted at in Bishop's 1937 watercolor, *Sha Sha*, which uses imprecise lines to frame the central image of a woman. The painting, which acts as a metaphor for Bishop's relationship with religion, is a loose portrait her friend Charlotte Russell sitting in front of a chalkboard featuring the equation "1+4=7" in

the lower right corner. In "Elizabeth Bishop's Other Art," William Benton suggests the equation refers to the other "inaccuracies" of the image, including the soft outline of the woman's body and the invisible chair she sits on. In her review of Bishop's *North & South*, Marianne Moore, Bishop's mentor and friend, writes, "Miss Bishop's speculation also concerning faith – religious faith – is a carefully plumbed depth in this small-large book of beautifully formulated aesthetic-moral mathematics" (*Prose* 408). The missing chair reflects Bishop's agnosticism and the lack of certainty that keeps her poetry from forming religious conclusions. It is as if Bishop sets up the equation knowing intuitively that an answer must exist, yet what seems to be the correct answer cannot be right.

Perhaps the most striking similarity between O'Connor and Bishop's writing is the close attention both artists place on the concrete as a starting place for exploring abstract topics, especially religion. O'Connor writes that "[t]he beginning of human knowledge is through the senses, and the fiction writer begins where human perception begins" (*MM* 67). Bishop's "At the Fishhouses" demonstrates the necessity and effectiveness of using the concrete to convey the intangible that O'Connor emphasizes. The poem begins with a sensory description of an old man fishing on "a cold evening/ down by one of the fishhouses" (lines 1-2) and walks the reader through this man's experience, which becomes the experience of the speaker. Near the end of the poem, the speaker invites the reader to "dip your hand in" and feel the water and then taste the water. Only when the reader is completely grounded in the sensory experience does the speaker reveal the analogy with a subtle simile:

> It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:
>
> dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,

drawn from the cold hard mouth

of the world, derived from the rocky breasts

forever, flowing and drawn, and since

our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flow.

Like O'Connor, Bishop relies on temporal experience to reveal the mystery that is already innate in nature and the human person. Wilson argues that the precision and exactitude of Bishop's observations establishes "that the flux of sensation already bears within it a transcendent significance and any lasting sign – the object of knowledge – will find expression in terms of, in relation to, the flux" (5). In other words, Bishop's metaphor of the water's flow as knowledge reveals the significance of both: "The sea's flow is *like* knowledge; but also, knowledge is *like* the sea's flow" (5). Bishop's abruptness in following "flowing" with "flow" instead of repeating "flowing" suggests a finite point of knowledge, unlike the cyclical nature of water.

Bishop's "The Moose," written in 1972, seven years before Bishop's death, and O'Connor's "Revelation," published in the spring of 1964, just months before O'Connor's death, each explore the necessity of knowledge in man's conversion towards God. Though Bishop and O'Connor's personal faith journeys differ in many ways, both authors are moved by the mystery embedded in the natural world. O'Connor's letters and prayer journal and her lifelong commitment to attending daily Mass reveal the depth of O'Connor's personal faith. However, the ambiguous fate of most of O'Connor's characters mirrors the unanswered questions Bishop explores in her own writing. Bishop searches for the object of truth as a source for spiritual meaning much like O'Connor's characters. O'Connor wrote that when a writer knows their audience is hostile to

Christianity, “then you have to make your vision apparent by shock – to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures” (*MM* 34). The vitalness of sight as a precursor to understanding and conversion is echoed in Matthew13:9-19 when Jesus explains his use of parables to the apostles using the words from Isiah: “Gross is the heart of this people, they will hardly hear with their ears, they have closed their eyes lest they see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and be converted, and I heal them.” Bishop and O'Connor’s narratives seek to draw out the constant and stable underlying reality of being within the natural world. The moose in Bishop’s poem and the hogs in O’Connor’s short story act as vehicles for the characters’ self-discovery and altered perception of the world, one that recognizes the imprint of the divine Creator and the order of creation. Hubbard writes that foundational to O’Connor’s Thomistic theology “is the belief that the invisible, spiritual world is not recognized in spite of our physical bodies and surroundings, but because of them” (45). Bishop and O’Connor embrace a closeness with the physical world in their writing because they recognize the mystery embedded deep within the core of nature.

Bishop’s “The Moose” begins with the movement of the sea, the herrings, the river, and the sun, each following the patterns dictated by nature. Bishop uses conditional phrases such as “if the river/ enters or retreats” (lines 7-8) and “depends on if it meets/ the bay coming in” (10-11) to draw attention to the unalterable laws of nature. The bold red of the setting sun in the third stanza colors the sea red, the muddy bay lavender, and the “gravelly roads” red (19). The sun’s presence and its ability to change the appearance of everything it reaches subtly emphasizes the sun’s all-encompassing influence. The

natural scene depicted in the first four stanzas of the poem relies mostly on simple descriptive language with few metaphors: “brown foam” (9), “rows of sugar maples” (20), and “silver birches” (24). Man-made “clapboard farmhouses” (21) and “neat, clapboard churches/ bleached, ridged as clamshells” (22-23) enter the poem in the fourth stanza between the maples and birches, introducing the relationship between nature and man which sets up the bus’s encounter with the moose.

The same inescapable influence of the sun sets the climactic scene for Mrs. Turpin’s final revelation as Mary Grace’s words burn through her pride and burst from Mrs. Turpin’s mouth: “‘Go on,’ she yelled, ‘call me a hog! Call me a hog again. From hell. Call me a wart hog from hell’” (*CS* 507). The inner turmoil of this first revelation drives Mrs. Turpin to consider her identity in relationship with God rather than constructing her identity from her socioeconomic status and race in relationship with other people. Mrs. Turpin shouts at God, “Who do you think you are?” and “the color of everything, field and crimson sky, burned for a moment with a transparent intensity” and “[a] red glow suffused [the hogs]” (439). For the protagonist, who quite literally sees the world in black and white, the sun’s rays blanket the hogs in the same way it blankets herself. As in “Greenleaf,” O’Connor personifies the sun, this time “like a farmer inspecting his own hogs” (438). The cyclical nature that Bishop traces in the opening to “The Moose” and the path of the sun in O’Connor’s stories points to an ordering that is inalterable by humans; Hubbard calls O’Connor’s sun “the searching eye of Christ” (49).

Bishop’s description of the bus traveling west in “through the late afternoon” (24) highlights the bus’s external elements as it moves through the landscape:

The windshield flashing pink,

Pink glancing off of metal,

Brushing the dented flank

Of blue, beat-up enamel; (27-30)

While Bishop's use of color is consistent with the poem's earlier descriptions of nature, words such as "flashing," "metal," "dented," and "beat-up enamel" contrasts with the organic imagery of nature. The pink of the bus, colored by the setting sun, places the bus under the sun's influence with the rest of the scene. Bishop focuses on the bus's surface; the windshield reflects light, and the "flank" is dented. Likewise, O'Connor's Mrs. Turpin categorizes and compares herself with others based on external attributes like beauty, skin color, and clothing. Far from recognizing the essential being of a person, the closest Mrs. Turpin comes to seeing the soul is when in her internal dialogue with Jesus, she says, "Make me a good woman and it don't matter what else, how fat or how ugly or how poor!" (*CS* 497) Ironically, Mrs. Turpin uses her perceived moral goodness to justify her physical defect of being overweight. In both examples, the authors first draw attention to the external, which in a world tainted by sin, reveals a diversity of imperfections.

Mrs. Turpin's thoughts reveal the moral significance of her perceptions, while Bishop's poetry more subtly hints at meaning below the surface. James Matthew Wilson proposes Bishop's poetry follows the Christian tradition of the meditative lyric "as a way of arriving at understanding of a truth that transcends us" (1). Wilson uses the first eight stanzas of "The Moose" to explain how Bishop's descriptions of the bus and the surrounding setting draws the reader to "a restrained but definite moral analysis" (3). Wilson offers the description of the bus's patience as support for Bishop's subtle merging

of “sensible facts and their moral significance” (3). Wilson continues to explain that Bishop’s descriptions are embedded with “unearned” moral significance despite Bishop’s rejection of her family’s Protestant Christianity and her “resistance to compulsory beliefs of any kind” (3). The same conclusion can be made for Bishop’s treatment of the moose as an elusive, otherworldly creature that radiates an unearthly joy. O’Connor, on the other hand, boldly explores the implications of her Catholic faith from a place rooted in confidence of the teachings of the Church. One author works from a foundation of doubt and the other from faith, but both work towards belief.

Though most of Bishop’s poetry is not overtly religious, Bishop, like O’Connor, employs religious language to make sense of the world. George Lensing argues that Bishop and O’Connor rely on “a symbology of Christian objects, allusions, and parables [that] often set in motion certain sacramental and transcendent reverberations” (187). Bishop, whose Protestant upbringing Lensing describes as “lean[ing] toward the Catholic,” and O’Connor, whose Catholic identity was shaped by the context of the Protestant South, find common ground in their individual experiences of loss, their disdain for modern religiosity and hypocrisy, and their attentiveness to the outliers in society (187). Lensing compares Bishop’s short story, “The Baptism,” and O’Connor’s “The River,” which both feature a character drowning after baptism by immersion, to reveal Bishop’s criticism of religious fanaticism and O’Connor’s exploration of “radical but authentic Christianity” (Lensing 192). A similar conclusion can be drawn from the comparison of Bishop’s “The Prodigal” and O’Connor’s “Revelation.” Both writers use the imagery of the sun and pigs to expand the pre-conversion moment of the lost son in the biblical parable of The Prodigal Son. In “The Prodigal” the sun “glazed the barnyard

mud with red" (line 11) and the prodigal son is reassured by "the burning puddles" (12) and considers prolonging his exile. The alcoholic son, an autobiographical character for Bishop, takes pleasure in the fleeting satisfaction of the moment and resists moving from his position. Mrs. Turpin likewise feels the intensity of her sin under the rays of the illuminating sun and momentarily remains still.

Striking similarities in the speaker in "The Moose" and Mrs. Turpin's journeys towards revelation include the time of day, the presence of evangelists, and descriptions that point to the purity of nature. Evening closes in on the speaker and Mrs. Turpin as the sun sets over both scenes. Bishop's imagery draws the reader away from the normality of life towards a supernatural experience. After the personified bus's farewell "to the elms, / to the farm, to the dog" (37-38), the bus starts up and "The light/ grows richer;" and the fog "comes closing in" suggesting that the passenger begins his journey late, as the "shifting, salty, thin" (41) fog creates a veil that actually enhances the passengers' view, like salt changing the flavor of food. The alliterations packed into the curious description of the fog and the end rhymes 'thin'/ 'in' and 'dog'/ 'fog' envelops the reader into the journey. The depiction of nature settling into the evening gives the reader a last glance at what the bus leaves behind as it ventures on. The repetition of white to describe the hens' feathers, the peas' string, and the fences and the simile of the dew gathering on the plants "like apostles" foreshadows the moose and its ability to draw the speaker's attention to something beyond the impurities of the surface. In "Revelation," it is the sun that grows "whiter and whiter" (*CS* 504) to create a greater contrast between the blanched sky and the black leaves of the hickory tree as well as between the superficial compliments Mrs. Turpin's hired women offer her ("Stout as she can be and sweet. Jesus satisfied with

her!") and the truth of Mary Grace's confrontation. The whiteness of nature points to its goodness and purity, internal qualities; the speaker and Mrs. Turpin notice the whiteness of their surroundings as they move towards a deeper experience with nature and the supernatural. Bishop's religious simile of the plants as apostles and the role of Mary Grace as a prophetic voice of truth each work to prepare the setting for a spiritual experience.

The movement of Bishop's bus contrasts with the stillness of O'Connor's waiting room, but both the bus passengers and the people sitting in the room are seeking something. Whereas Bishop's diction offers inclusivity, Mrs. Turpin's habit of categorizing and ranking people creates a 'me vs them' mentality that sets Mrs. Turpin above the others. Bishop pans out once again as the bus stops to pick up more passengers before drawing the reader into the bus with the speaker. The tenth stanza moves from "Bass River" through "the Economies" past "Five Islands, Five Houses" to the image of a woman shaking out a tablecloth. Just before the bus enters the woods of New Brunswick, the reader is invited into the bus as "a woman climbs in" and the speaker notes, "She regards us amicably" (78). The first-person pronoun 'us' introduces the speaker of the poem as a character on the bus and allows the reader to experience the scene as a passenger. The first line of the following stanza uses the inclusive 'we' to solidify the reader's perspective.

As the setting outside the bus becomes less comfortable and more grating ("hairy, scratchy, splintery" (81)) the passengers, feeling secure, begin to sleep and dream. Bishop's diction lulls the reader into the reveries and the stanza ends with an ellipsis that blurs the edges of reality. The subtle jump from the grandparents' conversation in the

"back of the bus" (95) and the "things cleared up finally" (100) "in Eternity" (98) sets the reader up to consider a spiritual reality that the moose's visit will emphasize later in the poem. The cataloguing of people and events is interrupted by dialogue, once again from the elderly in the back: "Yes…" (115) and "Yes…" (116) and finally "Life's like that. / We know *it* (also death)." (119-120) The couple's commentary on life and death is casual and vague. Bishop's emphasis of 'it' suggests the couple has some fundamental understanding about life and death that remains unsaid. Bishop's use of parenthesis adds ambiguity. Bishop, who suffered the losses of many loved ones throughout her life, must have felt the inevitability of death as a natural end to this cyclical pattern of life. The direct reference to "Eternity" with a capitol 'e' in the grandparent's conversation proposes a question of existence after death, making the mystery of life and death two-fold.

Mrs. Turpin's movement towards the climactic revelation begins first in her eyes, which signifies an internal stirring that propels Mrs. Turpin forward externally. As Mrs. Turpin stands in the kitchen, "the dark protuberance over her eye looked like a miniature tornado cloud which might any moment sweep across the horizon of her brow" (505). For O'Connor, the horizon is a symbol of the bridge between God and man, and the horizon becomes a clue for readers to anticipate a convergence of the physical and spiritual worlds. Mrs. Turpin squares her shoulders and marches off to the pig parlor with "the look of a woman going single-handed, weaponless, into battle" (505). The difference between the open-minded, curious speaker on Bishop's bus and the hardened hearted Mrs. Turpin presents an important truth. The speaker is surprised by their experience with

the spiritual world whereas Mrs. Turpin is aware of the lurking truth and sets off to assert herself over it.

The climax of "The Moose" begins abruptly with an em dash and the urgency of "Suddenly" (130) as a moose emerges from "the impenetrable wood" (134). The moose "looms… / in the middle of the road" sniffing the bus and forcing the bus driver to wait. The positioning of the moose in the center of the road calls to mind Bishop's translation of Carlos Drummond de Andrade's "In the Middle of the Road." In the poem, the speaker recounts an unforgettable encounter with a stone and the first line "In the middle of the road there was a stone" and variations of this phrase are repeated in every line of the short poem. The obstacle of the moose, much like the stone, interrupts the journey of the bus and the dreams of the passengers. The speaker's description of the animal intersects the knowability of the material world and the mystery of the spiritual world. Its presence is both threatening and harmless:

> Towering, antlerless,
> high as a church,
> homely as a house
> (or, safe as houses). (139-142)

The similes of the church and house (or houses) also point to the moose belonging to both realms; it towers above but it is rooted on the same ground as the bus. Careful not to make to direct a statement about the mysterious effect of the moose's presence on the passengers, Bishop gives a final description of the moose as "grand, otherworldly" (53) and then poses a question to the reader, again using 'we' and "we all" to emphasize the universality of the experience: "Why, why do we feel / (we all feel) this sweet/, sensation

of joy?" (154-156). The repetition of 'we' with the added qualifier of 'all' reaches out beyond the passengers within the poem to include the reader and the world outside of fiction. Bishop emphasizes that this experience is not a manufactured fictional feeling, but rather a real experience, in the deepest sense of the word. The "recognizable" conversation in the back of the bus that revolves mostly around suffering ("deaths, deaths and sicknesses") sets up the first half of the equation; the variable is suffering. The second half is the joy prompted by the moose.

The physical distance in the speaker's encounter with the moose, which includes the barrier of bus's windows, contrasts with the closeness of Mrs. May's moment with the bull in "Greenleaf" and Mrs. Turpin's unguardedness in "Revelation," revealing the difference between Bishop's dialectical perspective and O'Connor's sacramental perspective. In her book *Naming Grace*, Professor Mary Catherine Hilkert offers brief definitions to distinguish each perspective or imagination:

> The dialectical imagination stresses the distance between God and humanity, the hiddenness and absence of God, the sinfulness of human beings, the paradox of the cross, the need for grace as redemption and reconciliation […] and the not-yet character of the promised reign of God. The sacramental imagination […] emphasizes the presence of the God who is self-communicating love, the creation of human beings in the image of God…the mystery of the incarnation. (as cited in Anderson)

The distance between the speaker and the moose and the smell of gasoline at the end of the poem suggests that the joy of the divine is either unreachable or only momentarily experienceable because the encounter is tainted by the realities of a fallen world. The

passengers feel safe inside the bus and even though the speaker notes the joy that each of the passengers' experience from the event, the moment is fleeting. In contrast, O'Connor's Mrs. May recognizes the bull as a threat to her existence. Mrs. May daydreams about the bull eating through her property and house, leaving her completely exposed. By the end of the story, the bull, who O'Connor refers to as "lover" joyfully plunges its horn into Mrs. May's heart, eliminating all distance between the two, both physically and spiritually. Bishop's moose leaves only a "dim/ smell," but O'Connor's bull leaves the protagonist eternally changed. Bishop's dialectical imagination allows space that creates ambiguity whereas O'Connor's sacramental imagination produces finality and clarity, even when each of these is difficult to accept.

Instead of proposing the solution, or even *a* solution, to the equation, Bishop leaves the reader with the imagery of the moose on the moonlit road and "a dim/ smell of moose, an acrid/ smell of gasoline" (166-168). The smells of the moose and the gasoline of the bus exist together to represent the human experience that includes both suffering and joy. Bishop is careful to not assign meaning to suffering or to explain how joy is a transcendental experience. In O'Connor's essay, "The Fiction Writer and His Country," O'Connor distinguishes the difference between satisfaction and joy to show that true joy is a spiritual virtue and a longing of the soul for the eternal. Though Bishop does not explicitly name joy, in her acceptance speech at the Neustadt Awards Ceremony, of her poem "Sandpiper," Bishop said, "Yes, all my life I have lived and behaved very much like that sandpiper – just running along the edges of different countries and continents, looking for something" (Chronology). Bishop's poetry, maps, even sometimes quite literally, her searching for this 'something.'

The questions posed by O'Connor's Mrs. Turpin, "How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell too?" (*CS* 506), inverts Mrs. Turpin's dichotomous worldview so that she is faced with her own hypocrisy. Additionally, Hubbard writes that "Mrs. Turpin's conception of identity is, overall, quite inconsistent and illogical: despite viewing the superficial features of race and class as markers of an inherent self, she nonetheless treats people as if these distinctions are somehow deserved" (47). The prophetic words from Mary Grace reverberate within Mrs. Turpin, haunting her and awakening her to a greater awareness of her own identity.

Mrs. Turpin denies the inherent nature of the pigs by keeping them on a concrete pig parlor and washing them from mud and manure each day. Hubbard writes, "The link between Mrs. Turpin and her pigs carries so much significance not simply because the general filthiness of hogs relates to her innate sinfulness, but because she and Claud have tried to make these animals something they are not by refusing to acknowledge their natural characteristics" (50). Mrs. Turpin's obsession with keeping up appearances and comparing herself to others to determine each's worthiness prevents her from understanding her humanity. Mrs. Turpin's "Why me?" (*CS* 507) mirrors the cries of Job as she recalls her generosity to "trash," black or white people who Mrs. Turpin deems inferior to her by class, race, or wealth. "I could be nasty," Mrs. Turpin tells God, referring to her behavior and physical appearance (507).

Mrs. Turpin's reckoning occurs at the moment she asks the right question. Rather than centering herself as the subject of the question, "A final surge of fury shook her and she roared, 'Who do you think you are?'" (507). Mrs. Turpin's spoken words cause a ripple effect of physical change: "The color of everything, field and crimson sky, burned

for a moment with a transparent intensity. The question carried over the pasture and across the highway and the cotton field and returned to her clearly like an answer from beyond the wood" (508). The shock of this revelation, that God is unchanging center of reality, leaves Mrs. Turpin unable to speak. But in case the reader has missed the significance of this moment, O'Connor uses Mrs. Turpin's next thoughts to emphasize how the response to Mrs. Turpin's question humbles her. When she sees Claud's truck in the distance, Mrs. Turpin thinks it looks "like a child's toy" and imagines "at any moment a bigger truck might smash into it and scatter Claud's and the niggers' brains all over the road" (508). I propose that in the burning intensity of the answer to her question, Mrs. Turpin hears the same answer God offers Moses to the burning bush, "I AM who AM." Mrs. Turpin experiences the infinite power of God and transfers her own feelings of minuteness to the first people she sees. Like her daydreams in which she ranks groups of people by class and race that implode and end with everyone in the gas oven, Mrs. Turpin resists recognizing how the reality of God annihilates her constructed self-identity. Unlike Moses, who is commissioned to tell the Israelites of God's sovereignty, Mrs. Turpin remains like the unbelieving Zachariah, unable to speak.

O'Connor's Thomistic theology and focus on vision is essential for unpacking Mrs. Turpin's final revelation. Mrs. Turpin believes that "you had to *have* certain things before you could *know* certain things" (494). Rath expands on this concept: "O'Connor establishes the critical dialective between having and knowing things, a dialectic informed by the Thomistic doctrine that familiar objects of the material world provide soil for the growth of spiritual understanding" (1). The discourse in the waiting room exposes Mrs. Turpin's biases and her attitude of superiority towards others. Mrs. Turpin

and the sun move together towards the pig parlor. In her binary thinking, Mrs. Turpin reflects on the intelligence of the pigs and shoats "running about shaking themselves like idiot children, their little slit pig eyes searching the floor for anything left" (*CS* 437). Rath connects the shoats' searching to Mrs. Turpin's active intellect as she tries to find grounding in Mary Grace's accusation (5). According to Rath, O'Connor's positioning of Mrs. Turpin "between the divine source of light (sun) and the animal existence of the pigs – two poles of her material existence –" unlocks for her a divine perspective. The sun, what Rath deems "the eye of heaven" (7), is the farmer who looks over his hogs, which symbolize all of humanity, and Mrs. Turpin's ownership of the farm and pigs allows her to share in this understanding.

Mrs. Turpin is careful to wait until she is certainly alone before allowing herself, "like a monumental statue coming to life" (*CS* 508) to bend over and investigate "the very heart of mystery" in the hogs. O'Connor infuses the pigs with "a red glow" and "they appeared to pant with a secret life" (508). Even as the sun sets behind the trees, Mrs. Turpin "remained there with her gaze bent to them as if she were absorbing some abysmal life-giving knowledge" (508). Without reference to Thomas Aquinas, Hubbard also draws the connection between the material and spiritual worlds in Mrs. Turpin's quiet moment with the pigs: "It is the invisible truth hidden in the visible animals, the awesome spiritual reality that presents itself through even the humblest objects of the material world" (52). Hubbard argues that after receiving the answer to her question, Mrs. Turpin disposition allows her to see the mystery of the hogs' being tied to her own existence. The following vision of "a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven" (*CS* 508) that includes all the groups of people deemed inferior to Mrs. Turpin contrasts

Mrs. Turpin's earlier visions of people packed and carted away towards destruction. At the end of O'Connor's "Introduction to *A Memoir of Mary Ann*" she writes, "This action by which charity grows invisibly among us, entwining the living and the dead, is called by the Church the Communion of Saints. It is a communion created upon human imperfection, created from what we make of our grotesque state" (*MM* 228). At the end of the procession is Claude and Ruby Turpin, shocked "that even their virtues were being burned away" (*CS* 508). In a stroke of irony, the superficial uniqueness of each soul, which carries the divine image, holds more significance than the shallow acts of service that Mrs. Turpin offers through her pride.

"Revelation" offers the best of what O'Connor seeks to accomplish in her writing. Hubbard writes, "'Revelation' was her attempt to communicate the fullness, coherence, and eventual convergence of a world ordered and governed by Christ, in whom 'all things hold together' (Col. 1:17)" (53). Close friend of O'Connor and editor to O'Connor's first published collection of letters, Sally Fitzgerald, writes, "With 'Revelation' …[O'Connor] achieved her form as a writer, the realization of that potential body of work, uniquely her own, to which everything she written before had contributed" (*HB* 559-60). Fitzgerald notes that O'Connor's distinguished craft mirrors her achievement of "personal form" as she neared the end of her battle with lupus. Fitzgerald writes that when O'Connor asked to receive the Anointing of the Sick in July of 1964, she was serene, like one who has fulfilled a mission and is ready to return home. "Revelation" masterfully exposes the very center of reality that strips one woman's manufactured sense of self so that she can see her place among the communion of believers.

Mrs. Turpin's beatific vision at the conclusion of O'Connor's "Revelation" presents a challenge for those wanting a decisive ending for Mrs. Turpin's redemption. Jacky Dumas and Jessica Hooten Wilson point out that the vetted O'Connor scholar, Ralph Wood, offers two contradictory analyses of the story in separate publications. Dumas and Wilson compare "Revelation" to Plato's Allegory of the Cave from *The Republic* to argue that at the end of the story Mrs. Turpin is more like the chained prisoner only able to see shadows of objects than a redeemed Christian (74). The waiting room is Mrs. Turpin's cave, and for Mrs. Turpin, her warped perception of the boy on his bicycle "is no different from the form in the room" (77). Mary Grace, whose eyes "smolder and blaze" (*CS* 673), is Plato's symbolic fire which illuminates the truth of reality. Dumas and Wilson conclude that Mrs. Turpin recognizes the divine source of Mary Grace's outburst but is unwilling to internalize its meaning. Mrs. Turpin's limited perception is exposed by her beatific vision, but at least for the time being, she chooses the comfort of her cave rather than accepting the demands of truth and reorientating herself towards God. Dumas and Wilson apply Voeglin's analysis of Plato to propose two options for Mrs. Turpin's eternal fate after the story's end:

> Though she may return home still pained by the light of revelation, she may become the prisoner who brings the truth, who comes running into the cave, pointing to the sun. Or, like the pharaoh who at once released the Jewish slaves but then again hardened his heart, Ruby Turpin may withdraw again into the darkness. (88)

The end of "Revelation" does not offer a final statement of redemption for Mrs. Turpin – and in fact, Matthew 1:7 warns against condemning others' souls. In the parable of the

young rich man, who like Mrs. Turpin is a "good" man, he hears the demand of discipleship and "went away sad" (Mt 19:22). Scripture does not condemn the man, but the parable emphasizes the discomfort and demands of Christianity that the man is not ready to accept. Though O'Connor's swift moments of violent grace crash into her characters with force, the process of conversion is ongoing and requires a lifetime of orientating one's heart towards God. Hubbard points to the significance of the story's timeline which offers Mrs. Turpin time to wrestle with Mary Grace's message between the initial revelation and the final revelation (49). O'Connor's story is not about one woman's redemption; "Revelation" suggests that the revelation offered to Mrs. Turpin, is the same revelation offered to every Christian. O'Connor reveals the incongruence of Mrs. Turpin's ideas about herself and the truth of reality and the ultimate reality of God. Hubbard writes that "the image of God is an actuality at the base of our being and that restoration to the divine similitude has been offered" (53). Mrs. Turpin's revelation reorients her to the truth of her identity in Christ, which is a necessary realization for her redemption.

Bishop is also to give the reader space to reflect on the moral significance of revelation in "The Moose." Bishop uses juxtaposition in setting and mood to offer an observation that is colored by Bishop's complex worldview that is at the same time agnostic and Christian. Wilson concludes, "Bishop's poetry often depicts the material world as genuinely rife with moral significance even as some poems simultaneously entertain and resist that depiction by rending it a matter of poetic play or, more often, by simply ignoring the questions such a depiction raises" (4). The subtlety of the speaker's emotional response to the encounter with the moose only hints at the moose's moral

significance. Boruch points to the same effect in Bishop's Interior with Extension Cord: "…her extension cord – outrageous and out of reach – demands, as her poems do, that we also invent a very human back story…" (563). The explanation is missing but Bishop's work propels readers to reflect on the questions of faith and belief that Bishop does not or cannot answer. In Wilson's work of comparing Bishop's work with that of Herbert, who was a source of inspiration for Bishop, Wilson concludes that while both poets recognize what is absolute, "one of them can name what is real with the assent of faith, while the other cannot" (13).

Bishop scholars such as Laurel Corelle, James Matthew Wilson, Marcel Inhoff stress that Bishop's approach to religion and faith in her writing is calculated and precise in its depth. In Laurel Corelle's "Elizabeth Bishop and Christian Literary Tradition" the author's close readings of "Rooster" and "Anaphora" conclude that Bishop's "resolution to irresolution emerges not so much out of a predisposition for waffling as from a rarely acute sense of balance" (474). In the same essay, Corelle also cites Bishop's 1955 letter to her editor, Robert Lowell, in which Bishop writes, "I believe now that complete agnosticism and straddling the fence on everything is my natural posture – though I wish it weren't" (474). Though Bishop and O'Connor both intentionally avoided sentimentality in their work, the genuine search for meaning portrayed in Bishop's poetry offers an honest look into Bishop's personal struggle with faith and doubt.

O'Connor and Bishop accomplish the same goal in their writing: both writers unveil the mystery embedded in the natural world to prompt questions of man's relationship with God. Bishop's perspective gives the reader a safe distance to question the reality of God even as their experience of the temporal world is colored by the sun,

God's presence. O'Connor's work also begins with an honest observation of the fallen world but eventually brings the reader to a closer, and uncomfortable, encounter with God. The criticism surrounding Bishop and O'Connor proves that both writers appeal to believers and non-believers alike, and the obvious or more subtle allusions to Christianity create dialogue for readers. Of Bishop, Corelle writes, "Evoking the founding works of Christianity and Western literature allows Bishop to keep those works alive in her own and to claim relationship to their prestigious line for herself, even as she critiques the assumptions on which they rely" (Corelle 474). The unbelief in Bishop's writing, the space that Bishop leaves for the reader at the end of her poems, sheds light on an important and ever-present element of faith: doubt. Bishop's hard-won agnosticism and O'Connor's unwavering Catholicism each work to reveal the spiritual reality that can be seen up close or far away when one has fostered the habit of seeing.

Conclusion

In a culture that has become less concerned with its Christian heritage, Flannery O'Connor's fiction remains a vital anchor to the reality of God and the transcendent power of literature. O'Connor's stories shock readers and awaken their souls to mystery. O'Connor boldly explores the brokenness of humanity with cutting precision in characters like the fearful and materialistic Mrs. May, the judgmental and prideful Mrs. Turpin, and the bitter and shortsighted Hulga. Rather than explaining away sin or man's capacity for evil, O'Connor exposes the ugliness of sin in grotesque characters to uncover the most fundamental truth about the human person – that man is created in the image and likeness of God. This central truth lines O'Connor's fiction with a hopefulness that O'Connor strips of any trace of sentimentality. The moments of grace for O'Connor's characters are usually painful in a literal sense, and the reader is left to consider the disposition of the characters' souls, right alongside their own.

O'Connor's "Greenleaf" and "A Good Man is Hard to Find," both well-known pieces from her *Complete Stories*, place emphasis on the body as a necessary component for relationship and thus, love. Similarly, Mrs. May and the grandmother worry about their appearances and their property, but until they are faced with their own deaths, they overlook the deeper significance of their lives. In an attempt to control and manipulate, the women guard themselves from the vulnerability necessary for experiencing divine love. Mrs. May's deathly embrace by the bull and the grandmother's gaze into her killer's eyes prompt their realization of God and His piercing love. The two stories offer examples of a soul that rejects salvific grace, Mrs. May, and one that accepts with

humility her identity as a child of God. Both women's hearts bleed and both die, but it is the grandmother who awakens to eternal life.

The female protagonists from "Good Country People" and "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" offer autobiographical glimpses into O'Connor's personal struggles. Hulga and the girl see without truly seeing until they are cured of their spiritual blindness by the most unlikely of characters: the perverted Manley Pointer and the intersex preacher. The stories explore the shortsightedness of characters whose beliefs are purely intellectual. While catechesis and education plant the seeds for faith, O'Connor makes the point that working out one's salvation is essentially a movement of the heart, rather than the mind, towards God. Hulga and the girl show how pride creates an obstacle in one's path toward sanctity, and the stories suggest that O'Connor wrestled with a sense of self-righteousness, especially during the early stages of her career. These autobiographical characters are important because they offer evidence that O'Connor did not view herself as an exception to the hypocritical, prideful, and uncharitable Christians she criticizes throughout her fiction, and this self-awareness invites readers to follow suit.

More importantly, O'Connor's "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" touches on the deepest mysteries of the Catholic Church – that man is made in the image and likeness of God and God is truly present in the Eucharist. While most of O'Connor's fiction stresses the convergence of grace and nature in the lives of characters, "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" is O'Connor's only story that expounds on specific Catholic doctrine. The story showcases O'Connor's ability to make sense of deeply mysterious truths through storytelling. The Eucharist was central to O'Connor's personal life, and it represents the

ultimate convergence of grace and nature because it is the body, blood, soul, and divinity of God in the form of bread.

O'Connor's literary voice is one that cries out from the spiritual wasteland of modernity to remind readers of the spiritual battle being fought all around. Jordan A. Haddad likens Flannery O'Connor to John the Baptist whose prophetic message heralded the coming of Christ. Haddad writes,

> Her stories are plain spoken, spiritually adept, Christocentric, and brutally honest with respect to the cost of grace and the rebelliousness of human nature. They have all of the passion, grittiness, realism, violence, grace, and call to conversion that one finds in the very life and message of John the Baptist, who, lest we forget, ate bugs and wild honey, was clothed in camel-hair dress, lived in the wilderness, preached repentance and conversion of heart, accused a king of an unlawful marriage, and was then subsequently beheaded because of it.

The comparison highlights the radical and unsettling Gospel message of O'Connor's fiction to the modern world: "Repent, the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Mt 3:2) The reoccurring imagery throughout many of O'Connor's stories of the woods and the horizon reminds readers of the nearness of God and the second coming of Christ. The light of Christ, often symbolized by the sun, illuminates the truth within the soul, and this light either beckons one towards eternal salvation or repels with its blinding rays.

O'Connor's characters are free to respond to God by co-operating with His grace or by resisting it, but the inevitability of one's collision with grace is foundational to each of O'Connor's stories. O'Connor's strength as a Christian author is her ability to offer Christian realism without pretentiousness or tediousness. Rather than condemn her

characters to hell or preach from a lofty pulpit, O'Connor sheds light on the tensions within the human heart, a heart made for God but attracted to sin. Christ's presence in the world and in the heart of man portrayed in O'Connor's stories reveals man's closeness with his creator, and this closeness is unsettling for a "Christ-haunted" audience. This closeness also reveals Christ as a humble and patient lover who does not shy away from the sinner's heart. Though the characters struck by grace are exposed in their sinfulness, they also experience an intimate encounter with God unavailable to the characters who remain at a safe distance away. The redemption of O'Connor's characters after these violent moments of grace, which is often left unsaid, offers a balanced perspective of God as the Just Judge and the Merciful Judge.

For O'Connor, the imagination is an essential key to unlocking the hidden mystery within the human person and the natural world. O'Connor's Catholic faith gave O'Connor the framework of seeing and believing what is experienceable but not wholly explainable – the presence of God in the form of bread, the divine image of God stamped on the soul of the most grotesque person, or the temporal experience of grace. The Catholic imagination hinges on the belief that divine grace works through the material world because Christ has sanctified humanity by becoming man. One could argue that the literary imagination is essentially Catholic, which is perhaps why O'Connor's literary legacy extends beyond a Catholic audience.

Exploring O'Connor's work alongside Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair* reveals the more subtle differences between the two Catholic authors' approach to fiction with religious themes. Though both authors paint conversion as a lifelong journey lead by grace towards grace, Greene's psychological and emotional monologues offer a rounded

approach while O'Connor's sudden collisions with grace, usually through physical violence or suffering, communicate the urgency of conversion. While Greene is a strong author in his own right, the side-by-side analysis proves that what sets O'Connor apart from her contemporaries is not her Catholic beliefs but how her fiction flows from these beliefs in a way that is uniquely O'Connor.

Likewise, comparing O'Connor with a secular author also exposes the nuances of belief within her fiction. Elizabeth Bishop's "The Moose" offers a balanced perspective on what O'Connor asserts as truth. Bishop's awareness of mystery and openness to discovery allows Bishop to write about subjects also found in O'Connor's work, in this case the embedded spiritual mystery in nature. Bishop's skepticism keeps mystery at a safe distance as something to be considered and experienced but not something that can be named and understood. Bishop's poetry does not deny moral significance of the created world, but Bishop is careful to give her readers space to draw their own conclusions about what this significance might mean. O'Connor contrasts Bishop's approach with uncomfortably close encounters with the mystery of grace in the material world. The meaning of these experiences is not always immediately obvious for readers, but the implication of God's presence directly impacts all of O'Connor's characters. O'Connor boldly proposes a solution to the carefully balanced equation that Bishop presents in her poetry.

Labrie explains that O'Connor's readers do not simply put up with O'Connor's Catholicism because they enjoy her storytelling; "they will derive value from experiencing the nature of the worlds...as well as by the particular characters, themes, and tropes that populate their worlds" (19). Readers are attracted to the fullness of reality

explored in O'Connor's fiction that satisfies the thirst of the soul to make sense of the body and the soul in a world that is finite. Labrie summarizes the fiction writer's sacramental imagination at work in Catholic literature:

> What readers find in Catholic literature is a knitted unity of being which is both metaphysical and dramatic, involving the movement of God toward the soul and the graced soul's movement in turn toward God and toward other souls. Working with the fabric of material and the experimental, Catholic writers with their sacramental view of the world see imprinted upon that fabric, as in the legendary story about Veronica, the face of the divine. (19)

To take Labrie's analogy one step further, I would argue the Catholic imagination is more like the image of Christ in the Shroud of Turin which Italian chemist Giulio Fanti proposes was "burnt into the upper layers of the cloth by a burst of 'radiant energy' - bright light, ultraviolet light, X-rays or streams of fundamental particles - emanating from the body itself" (BBC). The Catholic literary imagination recognizes that the material world is embedded with spiritual meaning that cannot be separated from its physical nature. The divine image is not merely superficially imprinted on the surface; all creation flows from the image of God and reflects the Creator in the essence of its being.

One reason O'Connor successfully captivates an audience outside the Church is that her fiction flows from humility. O'Connor does not set out to smother her reader with her Catholic faith, nor does she manipulate the human perspective of reality to create what is not there to prove a point. O'Connor fosters and develops her personal faith in her daily life – attending Mass, reading theology, praying, and writing – so that her fiction flows from the beliefs that orient O'Connor in the natural world. O'Connor writes, "The

Catholic writer, insofar as he has the mind of the Church, will feel life from the standpoint of the central Christian mystery: that it has, for all its horror, been found by God to be worth dying for" (*MM* 146). Like the girl in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," O'Connor's perspective and understanding of reality is enlarged by her Catholic imagination that names the mystery of the human experience. Mrs. May is not simply a hypocritical, judgmental taskmaster who fears the destruction of her property. More than a herd of cows or a house, Mrs. May risks losing her soul. The spiritual warfare that unfolds in the hearts of O'Connor's characters acknowledges the most central conflict of human existence.

More than a career or means to success, O'Connor believed her writing was a calling, a vocation that offered her a path to sanctity. The diagnosis of lupus limited O'Connor's independence, and she remained with her mother, Regina O'Connor, at Andalusia Farm in Georgia till her death in August of 1964. When O'Connor realizes that she will follow in the steps of her father, who also died from lupus, she devotes herself entirely to her fiction, keeping a strict routine that prioritized prayer and writing. Ironically, lupus becomes the answer to O'Connor's prayer: "It all boils down to grace...Give me the courage to stand the pain to get the grace, Oh Lord. Help me with this life that seems so treacherous, so disappointing" (*PJ*). O'Connor's battle with lupus sheds light on the painful moments of grace offered to her characters that portrays the literal necessity of dying to oneself for the sake of one's salvation. Like John the Baptist, O'Connor understood that the complacency of Southern Christians and even the complacency she found in her own heart blinded one from encountering Christ. O'Connor writes, "What people don't realize is how much religion costs. They think faith

is a big electric blanket, when of course it is the cross" (*HB* 354). O'Connor's fiction challenges readers to awaken their senses to the reality around and within themselves so that they can see with clearer vision the reflection of the divine image in their bodies and souls.

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