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FLANNERY O'CONNOR AND GRAHAM GREENE: THE DIVINE LOVER

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Thelma J. Shinn echoes the claim of many O'Connor scholars in her 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, *Mysteries and Manner*, 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. 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 literally 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.

In the First Letter of John, he writes, "Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love" (1 Jn 4:8) and later he emphasizes this point further saying, "God is love, and he who

abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (1 Jn 4:16). In order 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. It is the Word made flesh, Jesus incarnate, that O’Connor calls “the fulcrum that lifts my particular stories (HB 227). O’Connor, a devout Catholic and daily communicant, is well-known for her witty response to Mary McCarthy’s comment that the Eucharist is a “pretty good symbol”: “Well, if it’s a symbol, to hell with it.” For O’Connor and Catholics alike, 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 facing 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 this sacrament, as St. Paul writes in the Letters to the Corinthians (1 Cor 10:17).

In her short story, “Greenleaf,” O’Connor’s depiction of Christ as a lover is offered directly to the reader. 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; this bull simply waits for Mrs. May as if he seeks to romance her. O’Connor solidifies the metaphor through the imagery of hedge-wreath caught in the bull’s horns that creates a crown, an allusion to Christ’s crown of thorns.

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.

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 was 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 entire 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.

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. Greene uses the imagery of the Crucifixion hanging in a 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 a 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 is willing to abandon his work as a writer and a future with a family in 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 the Gospel and Christ's words 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.

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 genuine 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 more hesitantly than O'Connor, each direct 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 conversion 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 early 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 certainly showered him in the moment of Sarah’s prayer for his survival on the day of her vow to God.

Mrs. May’s reception of Divine Love also includes a submission to her human weakness. The details leading up to Mrs. May’s final conversion includes 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 great submission to the will of God, even if the choice is made subconsciously.

O’Connor 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).

The supposed lack of transparency in Mrs. May's conversion is a common point of criticism 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). The evidence of Mrs. May's spiritual conversion lies in the details of her expression as she is pierced by the bull's horns.

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, as she suspected, everything changes. 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. 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). Mrs. May's horizon is completely altered by her encounter with the bull who is Christ; her focus shifts from searching the ground for snakes to gazing up into the sky.

O'Connor's depiction of Mrs. May's changed expression 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 offer insight to Mrs. May's intimate encounter. So perhaps it is something like the words of St. Teresa of Avila that Mrs. May whispers into the bull's ear: "... 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). 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 it 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.

O'Connor and Greene capture the great joy found in Christianity, specifically Catholicism, despite the steep demands that one must follow Christ to the cross. O'Connor's use of violence and Greene's emphasis on sexual intimacy reveal the necessity of suffering as a means to fully experiencing the depth of Christ's infinite love. The role of the Church, especially in O'Connor's life, is fundamentally to offer the sacraments to her children so that they might experience the physical reality of Christ's love in the Eucharist. While the non-believing reader might be scandalized or shocked by O'Connor and Greene's portrayals of 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). Though Mrs. May and Sarah Miles must give up their very lives to reach the fullness of their conversions, their intimate encounter with the Divine Lover offers them perpetual joy and satisfaction.

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