Grace hurts: Conversion in Flannery O’Connor’s fiction

by C. E. Morgan in the August 21, 2013 issue

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Idiosyncrasy is the hallmark of the great artist. The individual flourishes that denote a grand imagination almost always appear as interruptions in a bland marketplace, diverging from the prevailing philosophical, aesthetic or narrative standards of the day. In Tolstoy, an ambivalence toward straightforward plot reveals itself as he continuously derails his stories to show us characters dancing, threshing, simply stopping in the woods—almost as if he can’t stop the overflow of abundant life into his prose. In Faulkner, the reader finds the inspired devolution of prose into poetry, that more primitive expression of our fundamental emotions. Lawrence was given to tautological, almost liturgical repetitions quite unique to him, Chekhov to an abiding compassion that seemed to love character and experience more than form—in particular, tidily conventional denouement—and David Foster Wallace to a hyperkinetic prose that refused the placidity and quietness of the more realist novel.

Flannery O’Connor’s artistic signature involved a severity of image, dark-as-night humor, and a relentless preoccupation with sacramental violence. At the time, her output—two slim novels and some of the 20th century’s best short stories—was received as grim, brutal and decidedly unfeminine. Accordingly, her readership was small. But if hers was not the most digestible art, perhaps, like much great art before and after, it was never meant to go down easy. Great art sticks like a bone in the gullet.

When contemporary writers tire of the popular demand for books that “tell us how we live today,” as if the writer were mere handmaiden to the ephemera of the age, they can take comfort in knowing that their plight is not a new one. In the decade before her death in 1964 from systemic lupus erythematosus, O’Connor was busy defending and defining her work in essays and public talks, and her thoughts often returned to this critical demand for whatever was deemed most culturally relevant, that is, politically pertinent, topical or immediately useful to readers interested in understanding their identity only in the most constricted and myopic terms—usually American. The contraband often smuggled into the demand for expressly American novels was the expectation that these literary artifacts would reproduce the joy, ease and optimism that necessarily accompanied life in a wealthy nation. In other words: the reification of Western middle-class values. But O’Connor was having none of it. She was, after all, a Christian writer.

In her essay “The Fiction Writer and His Country,” she writes:

> The writer whose position is Christian, and probably also the writer whose position is not, will begin to wonder at this point if there could not be some ugly correlation between our unparalleled prosperity and the stridency of these demands for a literature that shows us the joy of life. He may at least be permitted to ask if these screams for joy would be quite so piercing if joy were really more abundant in our prosperous society.

With a sharp vision informed by Christian ideals, which insofar as they correlate to a more original Christianity necessarily resist the aspirational mores of a materialist society, O’Connor trained her sights on her immediate surroundings and on crafting her rich, idiosyncratic work.

Readers of her stories will find themselves inhabiting a highly stylized, tautly crafted rural South. The sun is a red ball hanging continuously in the sky; the landscape

depictions are carved lean of extraneous linguistic sensuality; characters are taciturn, sarcastic and often contemptuous. As she recounted with obvious frustration in multiple essays, readers frequently complained that the South wasn't as O'Connor depicted it. But her goal was never one of naturalistic mimicry, a faithful reproduction of everyday lived experience. In each piece, she strove to craft a self-contained, aesthetic unit, referring to the natural world but—while pointing toward an ultimate reality—not "realistic" in any formal sense of the word. Grotesquerie became the aesthetic connective tissue that bound her stories together, and those artistic distortions were entirely purposeful. As she wrote in a letter to a friend in 1955, "I am interested in making up a good case for distortion, as I am coming to believe it is the only way to make people see." One of her most powerful distortions would be her use of sacramental violence.

In the Catholic Church, the seven sacraments function as vehicles for mediating the presence of the divine. In O'Connor's fiction, violence becomes sacramental via its repetition and its revelation of what Catholics term *actual grace*, understood as a kind of supernatural help from God (not to be confused with *sanctifying grace*, which is a permanent, inner condition). In story after story we see characters broken open by the hard fist of the writer, acts of brutality O'Connor deemed necessary for the eruption of living grace into the stubborn, recalcitrant lives of both the nonbelieving and the self-professedly devout. In O'Connor's fiction, the worldly trappings of the individual must be removed by force, not because her God is an angry God, but because most of us—when the ugly truth is told—would prefer to go to the grave with our vices intact, damnation be damned.

For O'Connor, those vices were sometimes physical in nature, such as the anodyne comforts of middle-class existence, but most often they were spiritual. They could be the political complacency of the mainline Protestant denominations, ever resistant to the social gospel, or the intellectual arrogance provided by a fancy degree, or the hubris bolstered by a belief in racial superiority.

Her favorite target, of course, was pride, and if it reoccurs in her stories almost as often as the word *ugly*, perhaps it's because this particular sin—or spiritual misstep—is as ubiquitous to human life as breath itself. If separation from God is the taproot sin—the original sin and the definition of brokenness itself—then pride is certainly one of its most vigorous offshoots.

Don’t even try to repair yourself, O’Connor seems to be saying through her obsessive reenactment of this violent grace; God must break you to save you. Hers was the unyielding voice of the old American folk refrain, “God’s gonna cut you down,” or of John Donne when he wrote, “Batter my heart, three person’d God,” that poem so troubling to the feminist consciousness. For O’Connor, whose approach is perhaps even more politically incorrect today than when she initially published, violence is not ontologically evil; its use defines its moral status.

Little wonder then that her vision can be off-putting. Like her equally witty and razor-penned predecessor Jane Austen, her satire can leave a reader discomforted, her depictions sometimes lacking the warmth of obvious empathy, an empathy she was decidedly suspicious of when she wrote: “The kind of hazy compassion demanded of the writer now makes it difficult for him to be anti-anything.” But just as readers can find themselves feeling deeply for, say, Austen’s ineffectual but well-meaning parent figures, O’Connor’s cutting mode can elicit an almost involuntary sympathy on behalf of the recipients of this violent grace and a resentment of O’Connor’s judgments upon them.

After all, what kind of Christianity is this? Where is the Christ that called the children to him? Where is the dove that alighted as a sign of Abba’s grace? Where, for the love of God, is the peace that passeth all understanding? Well, it can all be found in a complex, authentically engaged Christian life, but O’Connor wasn’t interested in showing us what the religious life looks like; that would be getting ahead of ourselves in a world so radically broken that the truly religious are as rare as hen’s teeth.

Instead, O’Connor shows us over and over the radical experience of conversion. If she abandoned easy empathy or the overt introspection of a comparatively effete psychological novel, this is both an adherence to her chosen form of romance in the Hawthornian tradition and also, more importantly, the abandonment of emotional and psychological superficiality in the rendering of something far more important: the movement of the human soul toward salvation.

But what exactly does conversion mean in this context? What is the nature of the change, for example, which comes over the grandmother in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” or the property owner, Mrs. Cope, who sees her woods burned in “A Circle in the Fire”? And what does conversion look like for the fiercely independent Hulga of “Good Country People”?

The grandmother's conversion, occurring in the last moments of her life, radically confounds any expectation of the stereotypical deathbed conversion, wherein the dying person is converted to a redemptive belief that promises eternal life. The grandmother's realization that the murderous Misfit is ontologically her own child, even her baby, strips the cloudy veil of self-delusion from her eyes, and she becomes fully cognizant of how the family of humanity is imbued with innate equalities. Which is to say, this thoroughly conventional woman realizes that each individual, no matter how misshapen by sin, is a beloved child of God. Her conversion has nothing to do with the afterlife but has everything to do with the kingdom of God here on earth, the central concern of Jesus in the synoptic Gospels.

For Mrs. Cope, who lives in a middle-class bubble of self-satisfaction, the destruction of her property at the hands of the very ruffians she has disdained and attempted to police marks her entrance into a "new misery . . . [one that] looked as if it might have belonged to anybody." This misery, a spiritual prize won at the expense of her illusion of separateness, is the outward manifestation of a new consciousness. Her easy, untested life of spiritual platitudes (praying for the preservation of individual property) is replaced by an authentic religiosity born of revelatory misfortune, one that imbues her face with the misery common to all who suffer. Mrs. Cope, like the grandmother, experiences a conversion from conventional anesthetized religious belief, a kind of rote memorization dressed up in Sunday clothes, into lived, authentic belief, a blessed state explored in the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the poor in spirit . . . they who mourn . . . the meek . . . they which do hunger and thirst for righteousness . . . the merciful . . . the pure in heart . . . the peacemakers . . . they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake."

In "Good Country People," the young character Hulga has propped herself up on the flimsy wooden legs of nihilism, intellectualism and humanism. It's only when seduced by the Bible salesman and robbed of her limiting beliefs that she trades the intellectual for the sapiential, or worldly knowledge for divine humility. Her pride is brutally dismantled, and she recognizes for the first time her ignorance and dependency, which O'Connor would consider the natural state of the created individual. Implicit in this destabilizing conversion, except the one occurring at death, is a future where the newly humbled individual can be reconnected to the divine after a long period of spiritual estrangement.

Clearly, for O'Connor, conversion is a process as necessary for the self-righteously religious as for the atheist. It involves a violent attack on the passions as the early

Christians understood them: not as powerful emotions per se, but anything—emotion, attitude, action—that overpowers our senses and renders us insensible to the presence of God. To dismantle the fortress of the passions is to open a spiritual space for the various Christlike attitudes that attend love: humility, charity, tolerance and, perhaps most painfully, co-suffering, that searing transcendence of self which binds us emotionally to our fellow humans.

O’Connor’s difficult message seems to be that the pain we seek to avoid may be the very one that both opens the door to the divine and reintroduces us to right relationship with our fellow humans. Her obsessive return to this revelation—despite a cultural preoccupation with the immediately topical—illustrates both her artistic integrity and her faith in the ability of strong, individualistic art to speak with a visionary power to larger realities. Of course, the irony she reveals is that great artists always do “tell us how we live now” regardless of their subject matter; their art is never as facile as what some critics demand of them.

O’Connor’s idiosyncratic, timely message, which some might consider a kind of good news in itself, remains pertinent not merely to the religious but to any of us wrangling with the vagaries of life. We are human, so we suffer, we weep, we struggle to go on. But our pain can be the very path to grace, for it’s when we suffer the most, when our sense of self is stripped away, when we have lost what we most dearly cherish, or when physical pain and disease destroy the illusion of our immortality that we can no longer avoid the plain truth of who and what we are. In a polite world, where language is policed and we dream of a sanitized society free of violence, let’s tell the uncomfortable truth: the passage to knowledge and wisdom is most often paved by suffering. We rarely change until we are forced to, until our pride and vanity are stripped from us. And it is only when the egoistic outer hull is shattered and removed, when we are reduced to pure seed, that we can finally grow.