

SOUTHERN PROTESTANTISM IN THE FICTION  
OF FLANNERY O'CONNOR

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OF FLANNERY O'CONNOR

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the  
North Texas State University in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

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Denton, Texas

January, 1970

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1
II. RELIGION IN THE SOUTH: A SURVEY . . . . .	11
Fundamentalism	
Salvation	
Anti-Modernism	
The Power of Satan	
Emphasis on the Bible	
Devotion to Duty	
Omnipotence of God	
The Supernatural and Apocalyptic	
Anti-Catholicism	
Ethical Inconsistency	
Ministerial Authority	
Self-Flagellation	
III. THE FICTIONAL PRESENTATION OF PROTESTANT CHARACTERISTICS . . . . .	31
Fundamentalism	
Anti-Catholicism	
Authority of Ministers	
Salvation	
Ethical Inconsistency	
Faith in the Bible	
Anti-Modernism	
Puritanical Sternness	
The Power of Satan	
The Supernatural and Apocalyptic	
Ignorance and Emotionalism	
Self-Flagellation	
IV. CONCLUSION . . . . .	76
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	81

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Flannery O'Connor has been called "the most significant writer of fiction in our time despite the slender volume she left to American letters,"<sup>1</sup> and also "the first great writer of ecumenical fiction anywhere in the world."<sup>2</sup> Louis D. Rubin, Jr., has justly noted that "both her novels and most of her short stories are directly concerned with religion."<sup>3</sup> This concern is especially extraordinary and significant; for Flannery O'Connor, as a devout Catholic has been said to depict rural Southern Protestantism as her "metaphor for Roman Catholic truth."<sup>4</sup> Inherent in these pronouncements of praise are several questions and answers provided by sympathetic critics: First, is her comprehension or depiction

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<sup>1</sup>Brainard Cheney, "Flannery O'Connor's Campaign for Her Country," Sewanee Review, LXXII (Autumn, 1964), 555.

<sup>2</sup>Sister Mariella Gable, O.S.B., "The Ecumenic Core in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor," cited in Caroline Gordon, "An American Girl," in The Added Dimension: The Mind and Art of Flannery O'Connor, edited by Melvin J. Friedman and Lewis A. Lawson (New York, 1966), p. 129. Hereafter cited as Friedman and Lawson, The Added Dimension.

<sup>3</sup>Louis D. Rubin, Jr., "Flannery O'Connor and the Bible Belt," p. 51, cited in Friedman and Lawson, The Added Dimension, p. 51.

<sup>4</sup>Stanley Edgar Hyman, "Flannery O'Connor," University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers (Minneapolis, 1966), No. 54, p. 39.

of rural Southern Protestantism accurate? One writer says that "she recognizes the presence of an intense spiritual life [in Southern Protestants], which however grotesque its forms, is authentic and very much worthy of respect."<sup>5</sup> Another valid question that might be asked is whether Roman Catholic truth has universal significance. A critic answers that O'Connor's fiction is in no sense parochial.<sup>6</sup> It might also be considered how and why rural Southern Protestantism is a metaphor for Roman Catholic truth. A critic replies by calling the metaphor "a brilliant choice."<sup>7</sup>

If these questions and answers are not valid, what adjustment needs to be made in the critical estimate of Flannery O'Connor and her work? This study of the fiction of Flannery O'Connor proposes a careful investigation of the first question; that is, the faithfulness of her portrayal of rural Southern Protestantism. The second and third questions, in less detail, will be considered, especially in the conclusion.

Any understanding of Flannery O'Connor's religious thought requires some knowledge of her personal background and training. She was born in Savannah, Georgia, on March 25, 1925, and died on August 3, 1964, of disseminated lupus, an illness that made her an invalid for the last thirteen years

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<sup>5</sup>Rubin, "Flannery O'Connor and the Bible Belt," p. 52.

<sup>6</sup>Hyman, p. 46.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 40.

of her life, several of which were spent in a wheelchair. All of her mother's family for generations had been Catholic in the state of Georgia, where Baptists are the largest group and the Methodists are second. Her maternal great-grandmother donated the land for the Catholic church built in Milledgeville in 1874, and in the apartment of this estimable woman, Milledgeville's first Mass was celebrated in 1847. Peter Cline, O'Connor's maternal grandfather, was for a long time mayor of Milledgeville, capital of Georgia from 1807 to 1868.

Flannery O'Connor, however, lived her childhood in Savannah, where she went to St. Vincent's parochial school and later to Sacred Heart Academy. In 1938, after it had been discovered that her father, Edward O'Connor, had disseminated lupus, the family moved to the Cline house in Milledgeville, at that time an historic but declining old town of around eleven thousand people. At Peabody High School, where she graduated in 1941, Mary Flannery was "lively as well as studious"<sup>8</sup> and literary, listing her hobby in the yearbook as "collecting rejection slips."<sup>9</sup>

In 1945 she graduated from Milledgeville's Georgia State College for Women with a B. A. degree in English and social science. She made linoleum cut cartoons for the college literary quarterly, The Corinthian, and regarded herself "primarily as a cartoonist."<sup>10</sup> In fact, in her

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

senior year the New Yorker encouraged her efforts as a cartoonist, even though none of her work was ever printed in that magazine. In 1947 the University of Iowa, for Paul Engle's Writer's Workshop, awarded her the Master of Fine Arts Degree, and she began "to think of herself primarily as a fiction writer."<sup>11</sup>

Two years after graduation from Iowa, Flannery O'Connor went to New York City, presumably to get more in touch with literary markets, even though Mademoiselle, Sewanee Review, and Partisan Review had already published some chapters of Wise Blood in 1948 and 1949. In New York she became acquainted with Robert and Sally Fitzgerald, Catholics who resided in nearby rural Connecticut, and moved into their home as a boarder. The three began each day together at Mass in Georgetown, Connecticut. Fitzgerald, who became her literary executor, writes in the "Introduction" to the Signet edition of Everything That Rises Must Converge: "We read and passed on to one another Newman and Acton and Father Hughes' history of the Church," and during the winter of 1950 in the early mornings they took part in the liturgies of All Hallows, All Souls, Advent, Christmas, Epiphany.<sup>12</sup> Writing of a visit to the O'Connor farm home outside Milledgeville,

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Fitzgerald, "Introduction," in Everything That Rises Must Converge, Flannery O'Connor (New York, 1967), p. ix.

Fitzgerald describes O'Connor's bedroom and points up again her religious devotion: "On the low table to the right of the bed there is a small pile of books covered in black leather, three books in all, on top a Sunday missal, below that a breviary, below that a Holy Bible."<sup>13</sup> He also reports that she loved the country idiom of rural Georgia and that "She turned eagerly for years to the testimonial ads for a patent medicine called Hadacol . . . ."<sup>14</sup> This last remark indicates that O'Connor's interest in the idiom of the Southerner goes hand in hand with her concern for his spirit. Her amused reading of pathetically comic testimonials may reflect her rather ambiguous attitude toward her characters, which seems to be an almost inextricable mixture of scorn, pity, and wonder or curiosity.

Among the many distinctions awarded Flannery O'Connor during the last few years of her life was an honorary degree from Smith College in 1963. But she was not particularly well regarded at home. Stanley Edgar Hyman writes:

Milledgeville liked Flannery O'Connor and was proud of her, but tended not to read her work and to be shocked and dismayed by what it did read. At least at first, many of the townspeople resented her fiction as a mockery of the Baptist and Methodist faiths. If she wanted to make fun of religion, a number of them felt, she should write about her own religion and make fun of it.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., pp. xvi-xvii.

<sup>15</sup>Hyman, p. 7.



Others have been suspicious of her delineation of the South and its religion. For one, Isaac Rosenfeld, writing in The New Republic about Wise Blood, objected "that since the hero was plain crazy it was difficult to take his religious predicament seriously."<sup>16</sup>

Flannery O'Connor's peculiar experience as member of a minority religious group in a hostile environment does create unusual difficulties for an analysis of the religious elements in her fiction. These difficulties are readily acknowledged by students of O'Connor. One of her principal commentators even avers that "So far, the growing acclaim [of her fiction] has not been accompanied by any comparable understanding of her meanings and purposes."<sup>17</sup>

A primary difficulty is the tendency of some to interpret her Protestants not on the basis of rural Southern fundamentalism, but from the viewpoint of Catholics or even of the much more liberal Protestant sects. Those outside the fundamentalist milieu tend to regard these religionists as ridiculous, ignorant, overly emotional fanatics whose antics frequently seem to belie Christian principles of self-respect, decency, and regard for others. Flannery O'Connor, at least in some of her analytical statements outside her fiction, more than implies that these benighted worshippers

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Fitzgerald, "Introduction," p. xv.

<sup>17</sup> Hyman, p. 9.

are due more understanding and sympathy than they get from their sophisticated neighbors. Her stories, however, are replete with a surface realism which can and does obscure her sympathy in most of her renditions.

Another formidable difficulty for both the casual reader and the professional critic lies in the possibility of misinterpreting O'Connor's apprehension of the grotesque. The terms Gothic and grotesque, applied to her fiction, do not refer to the same kind of paraphernalia as that of Poe or Erskine Caldwell. Carter W. Martin, in The True Country, devotes an entire chapter to the problem of the grotesque and Gothic in O'Connor. As Martin sees it,

a . . . mistaken notion [about O'Connor's fiction] is that grotesqueness is the equivalent of Gothicism; it is not. Grotesqueness is some deviation from an explicit or implicit norm and may reside in physical attributes, actions, or situations. It may be simply verisimilitude or rhetorical overstatement; but when its intention is to promote a feeling of revulsion or terror, it is a textural necessity in Gothic fiction, serving there as an indispensable adjunct to other characteristics promoting the same end.<sup>18</sup>

The Gothic in Flannery O'Connor is thematic, not decorative; for her the Gothic does not titillate by frightening the reader. The Gothic horror in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" points up a general theme of the story, that truly a good man is hard to find. In this story The Misfit, a mass murderer of a vacationing family, is a grotesque. His

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<sup>18</sup> Carter W. Martin, The True Country: Themes in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor (Nashville, Tennessee, 1969), p. 154.

apparent deformity is his finding pleasure in mischief; his covert grotesqueness is his flight from God, his being out of God's natural order of things--the chain of being. In this latter respect, however, he is less grotesque than Grandma, the fake Christian "lady," for unlike Grandma, The Misfit does grapple with the Holy Spirit. Moreover, one critic explains that "the Christian writer believes that sin and the grotesque are joined because sin violates cosmic order."<sup>19</sup> Thus Flannery O'Connor also sees the non-Believer as a freak.

Stanley Hyman theorizes that writing for Flannery O'Connor was a cathartic experience. He says that "her stories are full of bitter hate in order that the author may be friendly and loving; the novels scream doubt and denial in order that the author may be devout and serene."<sup>20</sup> This kind of subjectivity, if it does exist in her fiction, presents tremendous difficulty for the reader, but it makes his reading experience much richer if he does sense such undercurrents. When Flannery O'Connor leaves Christian love and social concern out of the makeup of her truly religious characters, she alienates readers who might prefer more gentle and Christ-like people as saints.

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<sup>19</sup>Irving Malin, "Flannery O'Connor and the Grotesque," cited in Friedman and Lawson, The Added Dimension, p. 19.

<sup>20</sup>Hyman, p. 46.

A certain sameness of the settings and characters may make it difficult for the reader to grasp the universal significance of her work. But Flannery O'Connor's vision is not parochial. Inordinate self-sufficiency, hypocrisy, and sin are seemingly permanent and widespread obstacles to redemption, and these are the things that Flannery O'Connor is most concerned with. If it is difficult to identify with her characters, or to sympathize with them, because they are grotesques, the thoughtful reader of any denomination may be made more aware of some of his own secret and well concealed spiritual shortcomings. In addition to biographical matters already mentioned, a consideration of Flannery O'Connor's treatment of Southern Protestantism requires a more than cursory survey of religion in the South since the Civil War. This study will rely principally upon the authoritative and scholarly work The Mind of the South by W. F. Cash and make use also of later and more journalistic matter. The main body of the thesis concerns itself with the beliefs and characteristics of Southern Protestantism as they appear in the fiction of Flannery O'Connor. A Conclusion will attempt to answer the three formal questions propounded in the first paragraph and to suggest considerations which might assist any reader to interpret the work of this Southern writer.

Flannery O'Connor's religious beliefs and concerns underlie all of her fiction demonstrably, but the degree to which actual religious subject matter enters the works varies

considerably. "A Late Encounter with the Enemy," from A Good Man Is Hard to Find, and "The Comforts of Home," from Everything That Rises Must Converge, for example, have no special religious focus. Others closer to an overt religious orientation are "A Circle in the Fire" and "The Artificial Nigger" from A Good Man Is Hard to Find, "Greenleaf," "Everything That Rises Must Converge," and "Judgement Day" from Everything That Rises Must Converge. A number of stories deal directly and openly with religious matters and people with religious problems: Wise Blood, The Violent Bear It Away, and from A Good Man Is Hard to Find "The River," "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," "Good Country People," "The Displaced Person"; and from Everything That Rises Must Converge "The Enduring Chill," "The Lame Shall Enter First," "Revelation," and "Parker's Back." These are the works to which this study will refer most frequently.

## CHAPTER II

### RELIGION IN THE SOUTH: A SURVEY

Southern Protestants, perhaps since before the Civil War, have been one of the most homogeneous large religious groups in America; and despite the notable inroads of secularity in the Twentieth Century, Southern Protestantism, in its major aspects, remains less changed and less disturbed than some other fundamental institutions of the land. Witness the new opprobrious acronym WASP, which is commonly applied to this group of people. The term "Bible Belt" also has nationwide currency as a description of a broad strip of territory extending from Central Texas to the Potomac and including most of every Southern state. An isolated island of Catholicism in southern Louisiana (once thought colorful) and a few mushrooming metropolitan areas furnish only small relief.

Statistical facts substantiate these popular concepts of Southern religious homogeneity. Thomas D. Clark claims that the South is perhaps "the most intensively 'churched' region in the country."<sup>1</sup> Supporting his contention, he says

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas D. Clark, The Emerging South (New York, 1961), p. 266.

that the South "averages approximately 3.5 churches per 10,000 population."<sup>2</sup> In The Emerging South, Clark cites statistics on religious attitudes in the Southeastern part of the United States:

98 per cent of the people believed in God, 91 per cent accepted immortality as a firm hope, 81 per cent either belonged or had belonged to a church, a like number read the Bible, and the South led the nation in tithing.<sup>3</sup>

Forty per cent of the Protestants of the United States live in the South,<sup>4</sup> a preponderance which harks back to the great Scotch-Irish immigrations of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when these sturdy people flowed southwestward down the Allegheny valleys and spread out over the Piedmont. Of these Protestants the Southern Baptists are the most numerous, and are in the majority in every state except Virginia and Louisiana. As an instance of their numerical superiority it might be cited that the President of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1956 challenged its members to establish thirty thousand new churches by 1964 and double its congregations.<sup>5</sup> This sect, as Thomas Clark believes, appears to have more concern for numbers than for

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 267.

<sup>4</sup>Bureau of Research and Survey, National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States, "Churches and Church Membership in the United States: An Enumeration and Analysis by Counties, States, and Regions," in Leo Rosten, Religions in America (New York, 1963), pp. 240-241.

<sup>5</sup>Clark, p. 268.

lessening the social ills that afflict the South.<sup>6</sup> In Flannery O'Connor's home state of Georgia, the locale of most of her fiction, Protestants so predominate that the Catholic population is a mere 1.3 per cent of the total population. In fact only 12.9 per cent of America's Catholics live in the South.<sup>7</sup>

The most notable aspect of Southern Protestantism is the pervasiveness of religious clerical idiom and religious concepts in all areas of Southern life. Historians of the region agree that in the South, more than in other sections of the nation, "church-going has been . . . a part of the purely social life."<sup>8</sup> Thomas D. Clark adds to this last observation the caution that "to appraise the South without examining in considerable detail the place of organized religion would be akin to viewing a forest without singling out the trees."<sup>9</sup>

Despite the homogeneity there are, for those who know the region, some rather marked differences in the various levels of Protestantism, from high church Episcopalianism to the fundamentalism of the frenetic Pentecostals. Therefore, the characteristics of Southern Protestants as

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 268.

<sup>7</sup> Rosten, pp. 240-241.

<sup>8</sup> Clarence Cason, 90 in the Shade (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1935), p. 64.

<sup>9</sup> Clark, pp. 248-249.



listed below do not apply with equal pertinence to all Protestant denominations. These characteristics do, nevertheless, apply in some degree to Southern Protestantism considered as a whole, and incidentally this is the way Flannery O'Connor said she meant to consider Protestantism and perhaps the way in which most of the rest of the nation still looks at it.

#### Fundamentalism

Fundamentalism as a movement has long been identified as one of the principal characteristics of Southern Protestantism, especially the Protestantism of rural areas.<sup>10</sup> In 1961, toward midways of Flannery O'Connor's writing career, Thomas D. Clark wrote that "today there is still a solid foundation of extreme fundamentalism in the South."<sup>11</sup>

This particular aspect of Protestant belief is almost too amorphous for a definition and is certainly not confined to any one sect or denomination of Protestants. Specifically, a fundamentalist is one who takes everything in the Bible as literally true.<sup>12</sup> In general, however, a fundamentalist may be any person who is very conservative and old-fashioned or

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 251.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Dr. W. A. Criswell, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas, serving his second term as President of the Southern Baptist Convention, has written a book entitled Why I Preach That the Bible Is Literally True.

traditional in his interpretation of the Bible and in his application of religion to daily life. Frank S. Mead has summarized these ideas as follows:

One who believes in the infallibility of the Bible as inspired by God, and that it should be accepted literally, as distinguished from the modernist, who interprets the Bible in accordance with more modern scholarship or scientific knowledge and who accepts the conservative orthodox position in all matters of doctrine and theology.<sup>13</sup>

As a matter of record scholars consulted in this study oftentimes are distractingly vague in their use of the word "fundamentalist." For example, in The South Since Appomattox authors Clark and Kirwan first employ the term on page ten: "literal fundamentalist religion";<sup>14</sup> there is no explanation in the context. If a fundamentalist is a literalist, what is meant by "literal fundamentalist"? Is this expression tautological? The next appearance of the word comes in a remark on page 114: "A growing number of blue laws aimed at gambling, drinking, and prostitution seemed to accompany the expansion of the fundamentalist doctrines of Baptist and Methodist sects which dominated the section at the end of the nineteenth century."<sup>15</sup> A few pages later the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920's is labeled "militantly Protestant and

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<sup>13</sup>Frank S. Mead, Handbook of Denominations (New York, 1961), p. 246.

<sup>14</sup>Thomas D. Clark and Albert D. Kirwan, The South Since Appomattox: A Century of Regional Change (New York, 1967), p. 10.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 114.

fundamentalist,"<sup>16</sup> and mention is made of the Klan's antagonism toward those "labor organizers or teachers who departed from fundamentalist doctrine."<sup>17</sup> Another pejorative reference follows: "In the 1920's the blight [*italics mine*] of fundamentalism challenged the freedom of speech and intellectual inquiry in the classroom of at least five southern states."<sup>18</sup> The final reference to this term calls fundamentalists "devout but illiterate"<sup>19</sup> and states that they "have revealed . . . [*their*] ignorance and bigotry."<sup>20</sup> The general impression left by these authors is that fundamentalists are at least chiefly Baptists and Methodists. But may fundamentalism be limited by implication to these two Protestant sects?

In A History of the American People, "fundamentalist" does not even appear in the index, yet its importance in American history would seem to merit an index entry somewhere. Perhaps the only mention of the term appears in a remark about the 1880's: "The higher criticism was vigorously opposed by fundamentalists of all varieties, and more than one denomination was torn by bitter controversy over the interpretation of the Bible as a whole or the exact meaning of specific passages within it."<sup>21</sup> This passage states that

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 134.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 196.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 386

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 387.

<sup>21</sup>Harry J. Carman and Harold C. Syrett, A History of the American People, II (New York, 1958), 219.

varieties of fundamentalists exist, but does not elaborate on what these varieties are. Nor does it enlarge upon or define the divisions caused by fundamentalism.

Arthur S. Link writes, in American Epoch: A History of the United States Since the 1890's, that "the only disruptive elements in Protestantism after 1929 were the extreme fundamentalists, who insisted upon complete acceptance of historic creeds, and a lunatic fringe that included a wide variety of apostles of discord."<sup>22</sup> What sects compose the lunatic fringe? Would Link classify Mason Tarwater of The Violent Bear It Away as a member (the old man was put in the asylum for his religious zeal)? It seems that all these authors use the term "fundamentalism" (and its derivatives) in a kind of general pejorative sense without passing on to the reader anything but their own bias.

#### Salvation

At the heart of Southern Protestantism is its orthodox doctrine of salvation through faith in Christ. In spite of the diversity of belief within Protestantism, Henry P. Van Dusen, President of the faculty of Union Theological Seminary, believes that a definition of salvation that represents all Protestants can be written:

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<sup>22</sup> Arthur S. Link, American Epoch: A History of the United States Since the 1890's (New York, 1958), p. 622.

Salvation is trust in Jesus Christ to free the Christian from error and sin, to assure him of God's forgiveness of his past mistakes and misdeeds, and thus to restore him to full and free fellowship with God within the community of the Church.<sup>23</sup>

The Catholic belief about salvation that "He [Christ] offered Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the world by dying on the cross to gain mercy, grace and salvation for mankind"<sup>24</sup> indicates an appreciable affinity between the Protestant and Catholic doctrines. Furthermore, both Catholics and most Southern Protestants believe in the Arminian doctrine of free will, that since Christ died for all men, a man, of his own free will, may accept or may reject God's gift of salvation. Significantly, however, Catholics differ from most Southern Protestants when they add that "prayer and good works are necessary for salvation."<sup>25</sup>

#### Ignorance and Emotionalism

Ignorance and emotionalism still partially characterize traditional Protestantism in the rural South,<sup>26</sup> and even in the rapidly growing Southern cities a sizeable element of recent arrivals from the hinterlands provides a predominantly

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<sup>23</sup>Henry P. Van Dusen, "What Is a Protestant?" in Religions in America, edited by Leo Rosten (New York, 1963), p. 155.

<sup>24</sup>Mead, p. 198.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>An advertisement in a recent Fort Worth Star-Telegram attests to the kind of religion that appeals to some Southerners: "OLD FASHIONED Foot Stomping, Handclapping, Dancing, Shouting CAMP MEETING Under the Tent . . . Miracle Service Sunday Afternoon . . ." Fort Worth Star-Telegram, Evening, June 28, 1969, p. 5-A.

rural orientation toward religious activity.<sup>27</sup> The quality of unrestrained emotion, usually accompanied by ignorance, dates from the time of Andrew Jackson, when according to W. F. Cash, "lack of frenetic zeal [among Southern Protestants] was being set down for heresy."<sup>28</sup> Because the South has been beset by the educational problems of poverty brought on by the Civil War, sparsity of population, public apathy, and racism, the region "still battles illiteracy."<sup>29</sup>

In Religions in America Leo Rosten offers statistics compiled by Bernard Lazerwitz that seem to point to the emotionalism and ignorance of Southern fundamentalist Protestants. A 1957 survey showed that white Baptists who had completed only eight grades or less of school composed 39 per cent of the sect's membership; Roman Catholics had 34 per cent poorly schooled; and Episcopalians, 8 per cent.<sup>30</sup> Richard V. McCann in another survey of religious groups asked the question: "Have you ever felt you were going to have a nervous breakdown?" The answers threw some light on the expressive emotional quality of Southern Protestantism: 26 per cent of the fundamentalists (a term used loosely by

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<sup>27</sup> Clark and Kirwan, pp. 386-387.

<sup>28</sup> W. F. Cash, The Mind of the South (New York, 1941), pp. 56-57.

<sup>29</sup> Clark, p. 149.

<sup>30</sup> Bernard Lazerwitz, Journal of the American Statistical Association, pp. 568-569, cited in Religions in America, edited by Leo Rosten (New York, 1963), p. 285.

McCann) answered yes and led all groups, 16 per cent of the Catholics and 13 per cent of the Episcopalians answered yes. The study made by McCann did not indicate, unfortunately, how many in any denomination actually had had a nervous breakdown.<sup>31</sup> In the same survey the extent of personal happiness as reported by various religious groups relates indirectly to a consideration of emotionalism as a part of mental health: the Baptists led the polled groups with 15 per cent of their sect answering "not too happy."<sup>32</sup> The long established Southern congregations, both Protestant and Catholic, especially those in cities, have become more formalized and perhaps more liberal in religious doctrinal outlook. It is thought that such churches have failed "to offer emotional satisfaction to the less well-educated and economically underprivileged groups," leaving these spiritually stranded people to gravitate to the "so-called 'Holly-Roller'" sects whose "rocking humble church houses with [their] highly-emotional sermons, shouting, holy dancing, and incoherent babbling" have made social outcasts out of these "sweat-drenched"<sup>33</sup> children of God. The various

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<sup>31</sup>Rosten, p. 313.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>Clark, pp. 253-254.

Pentecostal sects,<sup>34</sup> rather than the more elite denominations, are mushrooming in the "heart of every slum area and on the side of many country roads,"<sup>35</sup> making these sects the fastest growing in the South.

#### Anti-Modernism

In explaining the anti-modern aspect of Southern Protestantism, W. F. Cash says that after the loss of the Civil War and the subsequent Yankee Reconstruction, the region felt obliged to defend itself from further domination by repudiating "Yankee thought and, with it, the thought of the world."<sup>36</sup> Modernism as a part of religious ideology has been supported by Northern Protestants, and came into prominence in the first decades of the Twentieth Century, generating Southern Protestant fears still widespread "that a modern social doctrine harbors a cynicism that will blight the warmly emotional individual responses which have characterized religious experiences."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>"PENTECOSTAL CHURCHES include American Protestant religious groups that stress divine inspiration. Their name refers to the descent of the Holy Spirit that took place on Pentecost. They believe in such manifestations and blessings of the Holy Spirit as divine healing, speaking in tongues, and visions. Most Pentecostal groups are fundamentalists, and believe in a literal interpretation of the Bible. They are most numerous in the South, West, and Middle West. . . ." R. Dennis Heard, "Pentecostal Churches," The World Book Encyclopedia, Vol. XIV (Chicago, 1962).

<sup>35</sup>Clark, pp. 253-254.

<sup>36</sup>Cash, p. 139.

<sup>37</sup>Clark, p. 252.



Stow Persons, paraphrasing radical modernist Edward Scribner Ames, lists three basic tenets of modernism:

- (1) Reverence for life. Men must not evade the religious obligation to study their experience with scientific vigor. Jesus's teachings, for instance, reflected such keen observation and profound insight into the problems of life that they were of universal validity. Ames presumably referred to the moral teachings of Jesus rather than to his messianic claims . . . .
- (2) Love for one's fellow men . . . .
- (3) Faith in the progressive character of human experience. Progress might not be inevitable, but one could not expect to get the most out of life unless he believed in the possibility of improving the world. . . .<sup>38</sup>

In regard to the first point, Southern fundamentalists might reverence life, but they distrust science.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, the Southern fundamentalist Protestant rejects not only science but social and political liberalism. Intellectualism and communism and all other isms thus become lumped together in an illogical and disagreeable sum.<sup>40</sup>

#### The Power of Satan

Just as John Milton's audience never doubted the power of Satan, so many Southern Protestants believe that Satan exerts his power today. That the Devil is a character of prominence in the Bible is proof enough of his existence for the literal-minded fundamentalist. Saint Paul warns the Corinthian Christians about the Devil: "Satan himself

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<sup>38</sup>Stow Persons, American Minds: A History of Ideas (New York, 1958), p. 419.

<sup>39</sup>Clark, p. 252.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

masquerades as an angel of light. It is therefore a simple thing for his agents to masquerade as agents of good. But they will meet the end their deeds deserve."<sup>41</sup> The Catholic position on the Devil is almost the same as that of the fundamentalist Southerner:

Catholics believe that Satan (the leader of the fallen angels) and his cohorts are pure spirits with an intelligence of a very high order and a will which is now obstinately bent on evil. The Devil and the other fallen angels can tempt and torment men, though all temptations are not directly attributable to them. Many religious thinkers have said that the Devil's greatest triumph lies in convincing the world that he doesn't exist.

Hell, to Catholics, means two things: a place and a state of punishment. The Devil is not confined to hell as a place, and will not be until the last day: but he exists "in hell"-- as a state of eternal punishment.<sup>42</sup>

#### Emphasis on the Bible

The South, naturally enough, has long been called the "Bible Belt" because the region places emphasis on the Holy Book as infallibly inspired by God to be the center of his doctrine. Faith in the Bible and emphasis upon it are unequivocal characteristics of Southern Protestantism. Catholics and Protestants differ significantly in their positions on the Bible, their disagreement being one of the two chief differences. Henry P. Van Dusen states the Protestant view:

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<sup>41</sup>Second Corinthians, 11:14-15.

<sup>42</sup>John Cogley, "What Is a Catholic?" Religions in America, edited by Leo Rosten (New York, 1963), p. 27.

Each Protestant is responsible to God for his own belief and life. In seeking to discover and do God's will, he turns to the Bible as the principal source of both light and strength, and finds help in the Church as the community of the faithful followers of Christ.<sup>43</sup>

John Cogley, formerly executive editor of The Commonweal, gives the Catholic view of the Bible:

Protestants believe in private interpretation. Catholics believe that the Church is the divinely appointed custodian of the Bible and has the final word on what is meant in a specific passage. The Church guards orthodoxy (including interpretation of the Scriptures) and passes down essential Christian tradition from one generation to another.<sup>44</sup>

A United Press release about the 1969 Southern Baptist Convention meeting in New Orleans demonstrates that for this numerous group their traditional ultra-conservative position on the Bible is a heritage to be safeguarded against the inroads of science and modernism:

Resolutions demanding that Baptists accept the Bible as literal truth were set up for consideration today at the annual meeting of the 11.3 million member Southern Baptist Convention.

One of the documents calls for the dismissal of all Baptist Seminary professors who fail to sign an annual statement affirming their belief in a fundamental interpretation of the Bible . . . .<sup>45</sup>

The fundamentalists at the convention failed to muster sufficient strength to carry these resolutions: as a group Southern Baptists are apparently becoming too sophisticated

<sup>43</sup>Van Dusen, p. 155.

<sup>44</sup>Cogley, p. 24.

<sup>45</sup>Fort Worth Press, June 12, 1969, Section A, p. 4.

for the fundamentalism associated with the Scopes trial of the 1920's.

#### Devotion to Duty

In the list of Protestant beliefs Henry P. Van Dusen includes "The duty to discover and do God's will in his daily work (the 'divine significance of every "calling"')."<sup>46</sup> This characteristic of Southern Protestantism might be called simply devotion to duty. For an example in practice, the Protestant believer might feel called by the Holy Spirit to write or teach as his way of best serving God and man.

#### Omnipotence of God

Another significant aspect of Southern Protestantism is a strong confidence in the omnipotence of God. W. F. Cash comments several times on this aspect of Southern religious thought. A typical passage is the following:

God, of course, became more distinctly a tribal god than ever [after 1870]. And yet, in His broadest aspect, He remained, of course again, the Calvinized Jehovah, master of all the living and the dead and resistless orderer of all things from the sparrow's flight to the stately pacing of the stars.<sup>47</sup>

#### The Supernatural and Apocalyptic

Cash likewise avers that the religiosity of the South may contain an inclination toward the supernatural and the

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<sup>46</sup>Van Dusen, p. 152.

<sup>47</sup>Cash, p. 132.

apocalyptic:<sup>48</sup>

. . . the religion of the South was brought over to the twentieth century as simple, as completely supernatural and Apocalyptic, as it had been in the earliest decades of the nineteenth, and far more rigidly held, far more pugnacious and assertive, far more impervious to change.<sup>49</sup>

In another passage Cash, characterizing the Southern psyche, describes it as having a "naive capacity for unreality."<sup>50</sup>

#### Anti-Catholicism

Anyone who remembers the hostility of the Ku Klux Klan to Catholics and the opposition to the election of Catholic Al Smith need not be reminded of the anti-Catholic feelings of the Southern Protestants. W. F. Cash explains its origin thus:

And as for anti-Catholicism, militant Protestantism, as we know, had always stood at the heart and center of the South--had there, perhaps, survived in its pristine vigor of feeling more fully than anywhere else on earth. And militant Protestantism, it is general knowledge, is synonymous with anti-Catholicism, as it has been from the beginning. For the Protestant all through the centuries, the Catholic even more than the Jew has stood as the intolerable Alien, as the bearer of Jesuit plots to rob them of their religion by force and of schemes for new and larger

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<sup>48</sup>"apocalyptic literature (gr., apokalupsis, "uncovering"). A type of prophetic literature common in ancient Hebrew and early Christian writing. It is filled with veiled symbolism (see FOUR HORSEMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE) and inspired by visions of the future triumph of the Messianic kingdom. THE REVELATION OF ST. JOHN THE DIVINE is often called the Apocalypse." William Rose Benet, "apocalyptic literature," The Reader's Encyclopedia, sec. ed., Vol. I (New York, 1965), p. 41.

<sup>49</sup>Cash, p. 132.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p. 54.

St. Bartholomew's. In the South, and especially the rural South, moreover, that feeling has probably always been fed and kept alive by the relative infrequency of contacts with Catholics. . . . Certainly anti-Catholic feeling has always been extraordinarily strong in Dixie . . . .<sup>51</sup>

Relevant to anti-Catholicism is the anti-Protestantism of Catholics in the United States. In the early 1950's Francis Cardinal Spellman of New York charged that "Protestant critics and opponents of public aid to parochial schools were Ku Kluxers, bigots, or subversives."<sup>52</sup> However, Arthur S. Link believes that religious animosity is now on the decline in the United States, and the two sects are on much better terms.<sup>53</sup>

#### Ethical Inconsistency

Clarence Cason, in 90° in the Shade, cites in the Southern psyche the peculiar ability to do wrong without seeing it as wrong, a kind of ambiguous combination of naïveté and rationalization that is not rationalization in the usual sense of that word. This phenomenon Cason calls the unruffled conscience, and elucidates his observation as follows:

Characteristically, the southerner acts intuitively. He not often deems a simple rationalization necessary before his head can rest easily upon the pillow; his moral rectitude normally requires no constant bolstering up through tedious vindication of his conduct and desires. He trusts native patterns. Nothing more clearly demonstrates how near the

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<sup>51</sup>Ibid, p. 334.

<sup>52</sup>Link, p. 623.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

ante-bellum South came to formulating an integrated culture than the fact that to this day the individual ethics and morality of her descendants should be submerged in a larger and inclusive social consciousness. As respecting slavery, drinking whiskey, and a state of class inequality, the southerner--left to himself--felt no moral obloquy; these things were included in the social order, for which he had complete respect.

The southern conscience is unruffled by the act of lifting a glass with one hand and gesturing for prohibition with the other; the puritan conscience, however, would require a fragile explanation such as "What I am able to do with impunity would be injurious to weaker souls."<sup>54</sup>

#### Ministerial Authority

The ministers of Southern Protestantism have had considerably more influence than those of other regions of the nation. Their power in the South antedates the Civil War. Because the spirit of the Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians was "essentially Hebraic--their ideal theocratic," Cash states, "it was characteristic of them all that they asserted, and that their communicants unquestioningly believed, the voice of their ministers to be literally the voice of God."<sup>55</sup> Clarence Cason maintains that although the minister of the modern South is "rivaled in his position as undisputed center of the social structure, [he] has often strengthened his authority by cultivating secular relationships in order to meet the new economics on neutral ground."<sup>56</sup> In other words, he joins the Kiwanis Club, plays golf with lay officials, and otherwise courts the laity.

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<sup>54</sup>Cason, p. 57.

<sup>55</sup>Cash, p. 56.

<sup>56</sup>Cason, p. 65.

### Puritan Sternness

The Puritan ideal is firmly established in the South. Not only historians have made such observations, but also literary critics. C. Hugh Holman believes that "the South knew and knows an intense, individualistic puritanism."<sup>57</sup> Puritanical sternness toward sin and pleasure is a part of the total aspect of Southern Protestantism. The disruptive controversy in the 1950's over social dancing at Baptist Wake Forest College is a case in point. The sternness originated after the Civil War, according to speculation, as an act of humility and self-denial by the Southerner to gain God's support in his attempt to survive and repel Yankee domination. The defeated Southerner came to believe that he had delighted too much in the flesh. Thus, Cash concludes, "in the end, indeed, almost the only pleasures which might be practiced openly and without moral obloquy were those of orgiastic religion and those of violence."<sup>59</sup>

### Self-Flagellation

While acts of self-flagellation as a religious practice are uncommon among the rank and file of Southern Protestants, these practices are current among some of the Pentecostals

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<sup>57</sup>C. Hugh Helman, "Her Rue with a Difference," in The Added Dimension: The Art and Mind of Flannery O'Connor, edited by Melvin J. Friedman and Lewis A. Lawson (New York, 1966), p. 83.

<sup>58</sup>Clark, p. 255.

<sup>59</sup>Cash, pp. 132-133.



of the South.<sup>60</sup> Of this activity Thomas Clark writes:

"They feel called upon to make impassioned confessions of sin and to undergo severe self-flagellations in atonement."<sup>61</sup>

These characteristics, if they are just, will be reflected in the Protestants who people the stories and novels of Flannery O'Connor. It cannot be expected, of course, that all characteristics or even more than one or two will appear in every character; but it can be seen that the sociologists and religious commentators who have interested themselves in the South are no closer or more astute observers than this Southern novelist.

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<sup>60</sup> Clark, pp. 253-254.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE FICTIONAL PRESENTATION OF PROTESTANT CHARACTERISTICS

The pervasiveness of religiosity or religious influences in the South is made paramount in the fiction of Flannery O'Connor for two reasons. First, she had a keen interest in people of her region--their attitudes, their dress, their manners, their speech--for she was, to begin with, a cartoonist with a sharp eye for telling detail and latent deformity. She was, too, a faithful realist in the matter of surface detail. Her thumb-nail sketches of rural Southerners are hardly surpassed by any other one of the bevy of talented Southern writers, not even William Faulkner. The prevalence of religious features is, thus, a matter which she is certain to have remarked for incorporation in her stories.

Also, she was inherently interested in religion and its effects upon the human psyche. Apparently her own religion as a Catholic meant much to her, for she made much of it in her official pronouncements about herself and her work. She came from a family rather noted for its religious bias. Her long illness and the imminence of death during her most productive years must have tended to turn her thoughts to metaphysical matters. The acceptance of her own

sad physical plight was no doubt made easier by a religious devotion which, as a writer, she felt the need to pass on to her reader in the most telling way, as though her lameness in body could be compensated by the health of her spirit.

And so it is that Flannery O'Connor, as an acute observer of Southern mores and as an intensely religious person, fills her pages with religious reference.

One of the first instances noted by the reader of Flannery O'Connor is that even her non-religious people, the profane and the indifferent, use a language colored by the fundamentalist pulpit. For example, in Wise Blood a young used-car salesman when asked the price of a car prefaces his answer with these words: "Jesus on the cross . . . Christ nailed."<sup>1</sup> He keeps repeating "Sweet Jesus!"<sup>2</sup> in a kind of aimless yet rhetorical monologue as he fills the car with gasoline. Interestingly enough, Haze Motes, the rebellious atheist who is purchasing the car, is irritated at hearing the Lord's name taken in vain and finally tells him to shut up. Everywhere Haze goes, God and Jesus seem to jump out at him.

An old Negro in "The Displaced Person" exclaims, "Sweet Lord, them Ringfields!"<sup>3</sup> in a conversation in which the

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<sup>1</sup>Flannery O'Connor, Three by Flannery O'Connor: Wise Blood, A Good Man is Hard to Find, The Violent Bear It Away (New York, 1964), p. 41.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 281.

former employees of Mrs. McIntyre are being denounced. Mrs. McIntyre, no Believer herself, remarks to Mrs. Shortley that her new foreign employer and their efficiency will "put the Fear of the Lord into those shiftless niggers!"<sup>4</sup> "The fear of the Lord" as a phrase is almost a by-word in the South, and though biblical in origin is often used in such a way as to indicate that the user has either confused himself with God or considers himself one of God's avenging overseers.

The landlady of Haze Motes, fascinated by the blind fanatic, exemplifies the Southern interest in and curiosity about religious feeling: "Watching his face had become a habit with her; she wanted to penetrate the darkness behind it and see for herself what was there."<sup>5</sup> What is there, of course, is his religious fervor and torment. Later, when Haze's dead body is brought back to her house, "she leaned closer and closer to his face, looking deep into them [deep burned eye sockets], trying to see how she had been cheated or what had cheated her, but she couldn't see anything . . . . She felt as if she were blocked at the entrance of something."<sup>6</sup> The woman, while looking into the Oedipus-like, burned-out eye sockets, feels but does not actually recognize the insight into life, the faith and the final peace that she has missed.

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 267.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 143.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 126.

In "Good Country People" Mrs. Hopewell cannot say to the Bible salesman, "My daughter is an atheist and won't let me keep the Bible in the parlor!"<sup>7</sup> Mrs. Hopewell, her Bible in the attic somewhere, exemplifies the common Southern notion that a respectable Southerner is at least nominally religious. The woman must not lose face with the Bible salesman. Hulga, the daughter, also assumes the Bible salesman to be an authentic rural Believer, and when she finds that he, too, is a contemptuous, arrogant atheist, she rages almost numb with shock, "You're a fine Christian! You're just like them all--say one thing and do another."<sup>8</sup> Ironically Hulga is deflated by a person who agrees with her atheistic pronouncement, "Some of us have taken off our blindfolds and see that there's nothing to see. It's a kind of salvation."<sup>9</sup> Hulga has rebelled against the religious homogeneity of the South, but she subconsciously believes that the South ought to be religious. In spite of her doctor's degree in philosophy, she is still bemused by the Southern fixation on religion. In a religious South she can rebel and feel superior: she has risen above the ignorance and superstition of her community, and this thought feeds her ego, compensating for her deformity and homeliness.

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 249.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 261.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 258.

Instances like those above can be found by the hundreds in the pages of O'Connor's fiction, documenting the view of Cash and other observers concerning the widespread religious orientation in Southern life.

#### Fundamentalism

The most controversial aspect of Southern Protestantism is, however, its fundamentalist bias so often and so pejoratively noted by critics and social historians. It can be stated with accuracy that Flannery O'Connor's most intensely and officially religious persons have characteristics which definitely align them with fundamentalist sects or attitudes. In Wise Blood, her first published book, the central character is Haze Motes. Haze is a very ignorant and unschooled young man from a tiny village in rural Tennessee, an area where fundamentalism is still notable. He has been brought up under strict religious rule and surveillance which he has come to resent as well as to fear and respect:

His grandfather had been a circuit preacher, a waspish old man who had ridden over three counties with Jesus hidden in his head like a stinger . . . . Every fourth Saturday he had driven into Eastrod as if he were just in time to save them all from Hell, and he was shouting before he had the door open. People gathered around his Ford because he seemed to dare them to. He would climb up on the nose of it and preach from there and sometimes he would climb onto the top of it and shout down at them. They were like stones! he would shout. But Jesus had died to redeem them! Jesus was so soul-hungry that He had died, one death for all, but He would have died every soul's death for one! Did they understand that? Did they understand that for each stone soul, He would have

died ten million deaths, had His arms and legs stretched on the cross and nailed ten million times for one of them? (The old man would point to his grandson Haze. He had a particular disrespect for him because his own face was repeated almost exactly in the child's and seemed to mock him.) Did they know that even for that boy there, for that mean sinful unthinking boy standing there with his dirty hands clenching and unclenching at his sides, Jesus would die ten million deaths before He would let him lose his soul? He would chase him over the waters of sin! Did they doubt Jesus could walk on the waters of sin? That boy had been redeemed and Jesus wasn't going to leave him ever. Jesus would never let him forget he was redeemed. What did the sinner think there was to be gained? Jesus would have him in the end!

The boy didn't need to hear it. There was already a deep black wordless conviction in him that the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin. He knew by the time he was twelve years old that he was going to be a preacher. Later he saw Jesus move from tree to tree in the back of his mind, a wild ragged figure motioning him to turn around and come off into the dark where he was not sure of his footing, where he might be walking on the water and not know it and then suddenly know it and drown.<sup>10</sup>

After four years of frustration and disillusionment in the Army, Haze returns first to his completely deserted home town, where his religious past begins to impinge again in torture upon his secular present. He goes to the city determined to establish and preach a new denomination which he calls the Church without Christ. Haze models his techniques upon his grandfather's. He buys a car, and standing on the hood shouts his appalling doctrine with such fierce intensity that one annoyed passerby groans, "Rabble rouser. . . . One thing I can't stand it's a rabble rouser."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 15-16.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

Because Haze is preaching before a movie theater, the ticket seller shouts, "Listen, if you don't have a church to do it in, you don't have to do it in front of this show."<sup>12</sup> Haze retorts, "My church is the Church Without Christ, lady . . . . If there's no Christ, there's no reason to have a set place to do it in."<sup>13</sup> Hoping for a receptive audience, Haze moves on to three other picture shows that night; then he spends another night with Mrs. Watts, a whore. Preceding his eventual surrender to the Lordship of Christ, Haze undergoes tumultuous and debilitating psychological anxiety. Caroline Gordon points out the significance of this anxiety to O'Connor's theme:

Haze Motes, Miss O'Connor's [tragic] hero, is illiterate and of lowly origins, but he is spiritually kin to more highly placed Americans. His whole life is given over to a speculation on the nature of Christ, the union of the divine with the human which theologians term "the hypostatic union."<sup>14</sup>

However, Louis D. Rubin, Jr., among others, contends that the tragic significance for the reader is seriously impaired:

Her novel . . . is only a moderately successful work, marred . . . by its too obvious religious allegory, causing the protagonist, Hazel Motes, to lose believability because his theological role is improperly and inadequately motivated. Despite some extremely fine scenes and supporting characterizations, Hazel is driven toward destruction for reasons insufficiently credible

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Caroline Gordon, "Flannery O'Connor's Wise Blood," Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction, II (Fall, 1958), 6-7.



to the reader. We never manage enough sympathy for Hazel to make his struggle and his fall mean something.<sup>15</sup>

Although neither Haze nor his grandfather are identified by sect, quite obviously they are drenched in rural Southern fundamentalism with its emphasis on sin and hell fire and damnation, on tortured and warped psyches, and on moving sincerity of conviction. Haze Motes misses, by a certain fanatical lunacy and the wry, humorous sarcasm of Flannery O'Connor, being a truly noble and heroic figure. The reader can almost wish that this furious fanatic had had truly wise blood.

Mason Tarwater and his grand-nephew Francis Marion Tarwater are major characters of The Violent Bear It Away. The whole novel is centrally concerned with the inner religious struggles of the younger Tarwater and his uncle Rayber, both of whom have fallen at an early age under the fierce and relentless religious domination of old Mason. The half-mad old prophet has spent several years in an insane asylum and after his release has returned to a secluded life in the boondocks of Georgia. Like Haze Motes' grandfather, the old man has imprinted indelibly upon his nephews his own intensely emotional religious fixation.

Mason Tarwater's extreme fundamentalism is apparent on several counts. His great intolerance of views other

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<sup>15</sup>Louis D. Rubin, Jr., "Flannery O'Connor: A Note on Literary Fashions," Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction, II (Fall, 1958), 14.

than his own, his evangelical fervor, his literal shouting about religion, his ignorance and distrust of formal education, his Puritanical sternness reflected in his constant condemnation of whores, his apocalyptic visions, his conviction of his own ministerial authority, his awed and unquestioning study of the Bible all suggest fundamentalism.

His young pupil, Francis Marion Tarwater, at fourteen rebels silently against old Tarwater's authoritarianism even while the old man is alive. Since the boy has identified his uncle with God, he conceives his rejection of avuncular injunction as a rejection of God. But like his uncle, young Tarwater is a fundamentalist. His violent struggles with the Devil and the Holy Ghost have a literal quality, for fundamentalists vigorously believe that they need to be saved from something.

O'Connor lampoons the hypocrisy in some of her pseudo-religious fundamentalists. She is not, however, attacking fundamentalism as such. She seems to want to show how this intense religiosity can appear ridiculous and grotesque if it is not sincere.<sup>16</sup> Among those who have perverted the

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<sup>16</sup>Carter W. Martin provides assurance of Miss O'Connor's sympathy for sincere fundamentalists: "Certain characters who profess to be religious are not, but the ones who are sincere [such as the Tarwaters, Haze Motes, and Bevel Summers] are identifiable and obviously presented sympathetically." Carter W. Martin, The True Country: Themes in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor (Nashville, 1969), p. 95.

Martin acknowledges the difficulty readers encounter in perceiving Flannery O'Connor's intense sympathy for fundamentalist Mason Tarwater: "The old man is the most extensively

Christian ideals are the rural fundamentalist Shortleys of "The Displaced Person," whose hate of a virtuous Polish Catholic family causes Mrs. Shortley to suffer a fatal stroke and her husband to commit murder. Mr. Shiflet, a former gospel singer and con-artist of the countryside in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," is blinded by extraordinary ignorance and ludicrous self-righteousness. After abandoning his helpless, idiot bride, Mr. Shiflet prays, "Oh Lord! Break forth and wash the slime from this earth!"<sup>17</sup> He is referring here, not to himself, but to a young hitch-hiker who, disgusted with Mr. Shiflet's mouthing sentimentality, belittles certain sanctities like home and mother.

In "Revelation" Mrs. Turpin learns that "good" people can in reality be bad when they make a fetish of their righteousness. This woman's inordinate and vocalized pride in her community's charity projects and church work so enrages a Wellesley student that she viciously assaults Mrs. Turpin, wailing "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog."<sup>18</sup> Following this traumatic incident, Mrs. Turpin

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developed character in The Violent Bear It Away who is consistently and unmistakably Christian. It is a grave error to allow the broad good nature of his portrait to minimize the seriousness of his role." Martin, 103.

<sup>17</sup>O'Connor, Three by Flannery O'Connor, p. 170.

<sup>18</sup>Flannery O'Connor, Everything That Rises Must Converge, (New York, 1967), p. 179.

wonders how she can think herself saved and at the same time give the impression of being from Hell. Later in an apocalyptic vision she views her kind of Christian marching last behind "whole companies of white trash . . . and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs."<sup>19</sup> Thus Flannery O'Connor scathingly indicts the self-righteousness in her fundamentalist characters. At the same time, fundamentalist Mrs. Turpin comes to realize the truth in the beatitude, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."<sup>20</sup>

#### Anti-Catholicism

The anti-Catholicism of Southern Protestants is faithfully represented in the fiction of Flannery O'Connor but not insisted upon. The first example of anti-Catholicism is in The Violent Bear It Away, at the Pentecostal tabernacle of a female evangelist. She remarks, "One year I was a missionary in Rome where minds are still chained in priestly darkness."<sup>21</sup> This is her sole anti-Catholic remark in a long harangue: certainly it would be possible, perhaps even more realistic, for the woman to extend this theme to many more sentences. O'Connor, by refusing to insist on this note, makes it more casually effective on the reader. She is expert at this kind of sly restraint.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 181.

<sup>20</sup> Matthew 5:4.

<sup>21</sup> O'Connor, Three by Flannery O'Connor, p. 381.

Haze Motes' army companions tell him "that nobody was interested in his goddam soul unless it was the priest,"<sup>22</sup> to which Haze replies "that no priest taking orders from no pope was going to tamper with his soul."<sup>23</sup> Fear of Catholic domination seems particularly ridiculous and ironic here, a kind of mechanical response without relevance to the possible situation, because Haze is too fanatical for anyone except his grandfather to approach on religious matters. Fundamentalists affirm "the priesthood of all believers," a major doctrinal conflict with Catholics.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps not deliberately, O'Connor demonstrates through Haze's refusal of priestly guidance the possible increased difficulty that the Protestant has with spiritual problems in that, unlike Catholics, he relies solely on his own individual priesthood.

Later, Haze interviews his landlady for a room. She asks his occupation, to which question he replies, "Preacher."<sup>25</sup> She asks, "What church?"<sup>26</sup> He tells her that it is the Church Without Christ. "Protestant?" she asks suspiciously, "or something foreign?"<sup>27</sup> He tells her that it is Protestant. Reassured, she accepts him, for at least that church is not foreign or Catholic-related! In a later conversation with

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> John Cogley, "What Is a Catholic?" in Religions in America, edited by Leo Rosten (New York, 1963), p. 24.

<sup>25</sup> O'Connor, Three by Flannery O'Connor, p. 61.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

Motes, his landlady tells him that "being a saint [is]. . . not normal . . . . There's no reason for it. People have quit doing it."<sup>28</sup> Further in this conversation she reveals her suspicion of Catholicism: "You must believe in Jesus or you wouldn't do these foolish things. You must have been lying to me when you named your fine church. I wouldn't be surprised if you weren't some kind of a agent of the pope or got some connection with something funny."<sup>29</sup> The landlady is not a practicing Christian, but she is a Southerner, and in good Southern fashion fears a Catholic conspiracy against her and her people.

"The Displaced Person" makes it quite clear that much of the anti-Catholic sentiment in the South comes from ignorance of Catholicism due in turn to the South's predominantly Protestant population. The priest in this story wears strange clothing, talks with a brogue, sees beauty in the peacocks-- a subtle Christ symbol. He arranges for the placement of the Catholic Guizacs on Mrs. McIntyre's dairy farm, usurps much of Mrs. Shortley's influence on Mrs. McIntyre, and, as Mrs. Shortley points out, witnesses for a "foreign" religion. She sees the priest as the Devil's agent and the Catholic Church as never having advanced or reformed: "They got the same religion as a thousand years ago. It could only be the

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

devil responsible for that."<sup>30</sup> Mrs. Shortley, fearful that some of her employer's funds may be diverted from the Shortleys, assumes that the priest's evangelical efforts are motivated by Mrs. McIntyre's prospective tithes to the Church: "First he would get her into his Church and then he would get his hand in her pocketbook. Well Mrs. Shortley thought, the more fool she!"<sup>31</sup> Like her husband who says, "I ain't going to have the Pope of Rome tell me how to run no dairy,"<sup>32</sup> Mrs. Shortley fails to appreciate the social concern of the Catholic Church to provide for "Displaced Persons" from Europe. Partially because Catholicism is externally different from rural Southern Protestantism, ignorant Southerners like the Shortleys emotionally condemn it. They fail to perceive that rural Southern fundamentalism has in many major respects a greater theological affinity with Catholicism than with the more liberal Protestantism, especially the Northern Protestantism. Hence Mrs. Shortley views the priest as "leading foreigners over in hoards to places that were not theirs, to cause disputes, to uproot niggers, to plant the Whore of Babylon in the midst of the righteous!"<sup>33</sup>

Undeniably Flannery O'Connor is sympathetic with Father Flynn in "The Displaced Person." A very human eighty-year-old

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 273.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 274.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 268.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 276.

with an Irish brogue, the priest is an unassuming and friendly man devoid of pomposity and even a little dull. He bores Mrs. McIntyre with his mechanical incessant talk about Redemption. O'Connor might very well have created a priest more effective and persistent in defending Mr. Guizac and in evangelizing Mrs. McIntyre. He is perhaps a little too cautious and timid to suit devout Catholic readers:

The old priest kept away as if he had been frightened by his last visit but finally, seeing that the Displaced Person had not been fired, he ventured to call again to take up giving Mrs. McIntyre instructions where he remembered leaving them off.<sup>34</sup>

Father Flynn instructs a resistant Mrs. McIntyre and others at every opportunity: ". . . forcing a little definition of one of the sacraments or of some dogma into each conversation he had, no matter with whom."<sup>35</sup> He emphasizes "Jesus Christ Our Lord . . . as a Redeemer to mankind . . . ."<sup>36</sup>

Mrs. McIntyre, deserted and very sick, is remembered only by the priest: He "came regularly once a week . . . [and] would come in and sit by the side of her bed and explain the doctrines of the Church."<sup>37</sup> Flannery O'Connor, perhaps not deliberately, implies that the Protestants have failed to serve the spiritual needs of their people. Mrs. McIntyre has been left spiritually unattended, and the Catholics have had to come to her assistance. There is a definite suggestion

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 293.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 299.



here that the vast multitude in the South living under the Protestant churches have not been properly fed and are hungering spiritually.

The central character in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" is a pre-adolescent Catholic girl. Through this child Flannery O'Connor shows that Catholics, like fundamentalists, may experience a spiritual epiphany in which they realize their self-righteousness and spiritual deficiencies: "The child knelt down between her mother and the nun and they were well into the 'Tantum Ergo' before her ugly thoughts stopped and she began to realize that she was in the presence of God."<sup>38</sup> Her ugly thoughts stop only temporarily, however, for soon afterwards she prays: "Lord, Lord, thank You that I'm not in the Church of God, thank You Lord, thank You!"<sup>39</sup> Perhaps reflecting the smugness of her elders, she finds utterly repulsive the rustic piety of two sixteen-year-old youths who are prospective ministers of the Church of God. Because these ignorant boys believe that a Catholic Latin song "must be Jew singing,"<sup>40</sup> she shouts, "You big dumb Church of God ox!"<sup>41</sup> Flannery O'Connor evidences respect for the true piety of these boys. Awkwardly the boys attempt to share with the two Catholic teenage girls their love of Christ. They sing "The Lily of the Valley" and

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 193.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 188.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 190.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

"The Old Rugged Cross," and the girls can scarcely restrain their scorn. These girls from the convent school sneer about a nun's teaching them that they are temples of the Holy Ghost; they call each other "Temple One" and "Temple Two." They disparage as scandalous the boy's evangelistic fervor, saying that these boys are "both going to be Church of God preachers because you don't have to know nothing to be one."<sup>42</sup> Through this story Flannery O'Connor expresses in a lower key the predominant theme of her fiction:

That the Christian religion is a scandalous business. Furthermore, its Christ is an offense and a stumbling block, even a Grotesque; and the descent of its Holy Ghost is a "purifying terror." In short, the Christian gospel is enough to curl the hair of the genteel, the modern intellectual, the conventionally religious, and all those others who have no place for it in their well regulated economies.<sup>43</sup>

In the last sentence of "The Temple of the Holy Ghost" the Holy Ghost begins its purifying terror on the little girl: "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."<sup>44</sup>

One of O'Connor's favorite ironies appears in the words of the ignorant Protestant mother to Mr. Shiflet in "The Life

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 186.

<sup>43</sup> Robert Drake, "Hair-Curling Gospel," The Christian Century, LXXXII (May 19, 1965), 656.

<sup>44</sup> O'Connor, Three by Flannery O'Connor, p. 194.

You Save May Be Your Own." Mr. Shiflet has been assigned to sleep outside the house in a dilapidated car, but does not object:

"Why listen, lady," he said with a grin of delight, "the monks of old slept in their coffins!"  
 "They wasn't as advanced as we are," the old woman said.<sup>45</sup>

The backwardness of the woman making this statement speaks volumes about Catholic-Protestant relationships and Flannery O'Connor's view of them. It certainly indicates a gleam of half-malicious sarcasm on the part of the Catholic author.

In the character of Father Finn in "The Enduring Chill," Flannery O'Connor indicates her great sympathy for primitive evangelism as opposed to intellectuality. In an imagined serious illness, Asbury, an atheist of Methodist background, seeks the intellectual comfort of a Jesuit priest. However, an ineptly comic, gruff, grease-stained, nearly deaf and nearly blind, and intellectually unsophisticated Jesuit appears, saying in a hearty voice, "I'm Fahther Finn--from Purrgratory."<sup>46</sup> The disbeliever Asbury is chagrined to hear him say:

"How can the Holy Ghost fill your soul when it's full of trash?" the priest roared. "The Holy Ghost will not come until you see yourself as you are--a lazy ignorant conceited youth!" he said, pounding his fist on the little bedside table.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>46</sup> O'Connor, Everything That Rises Must Converge, p. 103.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 105.

In spite of his histrionic manner, Father Finn plants the seed of the Holy Ghost in sophisticated Asbury, just as the bombastic Mason Tarwater plants the seed of young Tarwater's spirituality in him. Since Father Finn is an almost ludicrous parody of the evangelistic style of the unsophisticated fundamentalist preacher, one may safely state that Flannery O'Connor believes that the oftentimes emotional and unsophisticated evangelistic style of the fundamentalist may be truly inspired of the Holy Spirit and may obtain rather surprising results.

On the whole her treatment of Catholic anti-Protestantism tends to balance somewhat her treatment of anti-Catholic Protestantism. Even though O'Connor presents relatively few Catholics in her works, she preserves her artistic integrity by not presenting her Catholics as implausibly virtuous and by introducing as well a few grotesque or annoying Catholic characters.

#### Authority of Ministers

The Southern Protestant belief that their ministers represent the voice of God has been duly noted in the fiction of O'Connor. She condemns those ministers who have perverted this authority. In Wise Blood, Onnie Jay Holy, a thoroughly cynical sidewalk evangelist, attracts numerous listeners who seem more than willing to give ear to any man of God, as he is often referred to in the South, or perhaps to anyone who is "giving something away":

"Friends," the man said, "lemme innerduce myself. My name is Onnie Jay Holy and I'm telling it to you so you can check up and see I don't tell you any lie. I'm a preacher and I don't mind who knows. it but I wouldn't have you believe nothing you can't feel in your own hearts. You people coming up on the edge push right on up in here where you can hear good," he said. "I'm not selling a thing. I'm giving something away!" A considerable number of people had stopped. . . .<sup>48</sup>

The author's distaste for this false preacher immediately appears in his real name, "Hoover Shoats," pigs being biblical symbols of spiritual uncleanness.<sup>49</sup> Instead of preaching the Gospel truth of original sin, he preaches a distortion of Christianity to elicit more easily his listeners' contributions: "Every person that comes on to this earth . . . is born sweet and full of love."<sup>50</sup> Shoats explains to his audience that they can achieve a sweet childlike happiness that he professes to have found. Seeing the possibility of a lucrative preaching partnership, Shoats praises Haze by telling the crowd of Haze's powers, calling him "the Prophet."<sup>51</sup> Haze, horrified at this charlatan's amoral blasphemy, denounces any association with Onnie Jay Holy. The reaction to the denial suggests a lack of any real spirituality on the

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<sup>48</sup>O'Connor, Three by Flannery O'Connor, pp. 82-83.

<sup>49</sup>Carter W. Martin, The True Country: Themes in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor (Nashville, Tennessee, 1969), p. 47. Hereafter cited as Martin, The True Country.

<sup>50</sup>O'Connor, Three by Flannery O'Connor, p. 50.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p. 51.

part of the crowd or the preacher: "The man [Shoats] ignored this and so did the people."<sup>52</sup>

Another false preacher in Wise Blood is Asa Hawks. Unlike Hoover Shoats, he makes no pretense about the sweetness of Christianity. Because Hawks is a disillusioned Believer with a grudge against Jesus, he sadistically mocks religion to his sidewalk listeners, who seem as gapingly hypnotized as ever, regardless of doctrine.

For a while Haze Motes is a false preacher; however, he attempts to preach his "Church Without Christ" with sincere conviction. He attracts only one convert, a lonely moron, for his listeners find his fierce, deeply felt brand of religion unappealing. This failure to win converts, Hoover Shoats explains to Haze, comes from being one of the "inner-leckchuls,"<sup>53</sup> another one of Flannery O'Connor's barbs directed at Protestant intellectuality or lack of it. Flannery O'Connor describes her wandering Protestant evangelists and would-be preachers with a mixture of venom and awe and compassion very ambiguous and difficult to evaluate.

Among those preachers whose authority is admired by Flannery O'Connor is Bevel Summers, a nineteen-year-old faith healer in "The River." O'Connor indicates the authenticity of his being God's agent when the little love-starved Harry Ashfield finds great solace in his baptism by Summers.

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., p. 88.

Another is the child evangelist, Lucette, to whose sermon young Tarwater is magnetically drawn. The boy is visibly moved by her sermon in which she cries, "Jesus is the word of God and Jesus is love . . . if you don't know what love is you won't know Jesus when He comes. You won't be ready."<sup>54</sup> Of Lucette, one critic writes: "Lucette's eloquent sermon comes at the center of the novel, and, along with Mason Tarwater's fervidly religious harangues, it represents the most significant vocal expression of the Christian values that inform the entire novel."<sup>55</sup> At the last of The Violent Bear It Away, young Tarwater marches away to the city to fulfill his God-given commission to preach and prophesy.

That a minister may be God's voice is emphatically evident in Old Tarwater. When Rayber threatens to put the old man back in the asylum, the old prophet hollers his minister's immunity: "You can't touch the servant of the Lord!"<sup>56</sup> On another occasion old Tarwater reveals his belief in his absolute God-given authority. He feels that he is relaying a message from God to his young nephew; the boy indicates his suspicion of his uncle's authority:

And then he would grip the boy's shoulder and put a fierce pressure on it. "And if I don't get him baptized, it'll be for you to do," he said. "I enjoin you to do it, boy."

Nothing irritated the boy so much as this. "I take my orders from the Lord," he would say in an ugly

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<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p. 382.

<sup>55</sup>Martin, The True Country, p. 101.

<sup>56</sup>O'Connor, Three by Flannery O'Connor, p. 323.

voice, trying to pry the fingers out of his shoulder. "Not from you."

"The Lord will give them to you," the old man said, gripping his shoulder tighter.<sup>57</sup>

However, Tarwater ultimately yields to his uncle's authoritative commission to baptize the idiot son of agnostic Rayber and the social welfare woman, Bernice Bishop. Flannery O'Connor approves obedience to legitimate authority, the old man being legitimate in her view.

#### Salvation

Most of the major characters in the fiction of Flannery O'Connor struggle with salvation, either to accept it or to reject it. Most of these characters are Protestant. Hence, it is reasonable to conclude that salvation or redemption, as defined by Protestantism, forms the dramatic and thematic core of her work. Flannery O'Connor has remarked in several places that Christ is, as He is for the Protestant, the center of her Catholic faith:

We lost our innocence in the fall of our first parents and our return to it is through the redemption which was brought about by Christ's death and by our slow participation in it.<sup>58</sup>

In "The Fiction Writer and His Country" she writes further, "For me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 349.

<sup>58</sup> Flannery O'Connor, "The Church and the Fiction Writer," p. 734, cited in Martin, The True Country, p. 15.



Christ and that what I see in the world I see in its relation to that."<sup>59</sup>

At this point the question arises, Does the Roman Catholic Church in its official teaching permit Flannery O'Connor in good conscience to harbor the admiration of fundamentalist Protestant old Tarwater that she expresses in such statements as: "Old Tarwater is the hero of 'The Violent Bear It Away,' and I'm right behind him 100 per cent";<sup>60</sup> and again about old Tarwater, "He lacks the visible Church but Christ is the center of his life"?<sup>61</sup> If the answer be affirmative, then perhaps she has covertly forced his character around a peculiar and separate Catholic theological scaffolding; if negative, then, she is not an orthodox Catholic. In short, some of her readers, both Catholic and Protestant, could believe that if Flannery O'Connor actually expresses orthodox Catholicism, then automatically she will write of Protestants with a built-in, hostile distortion of their faith. They could and they do! Most of her published critics, of all faiths, however, repudiate charges of doctrinal distortion. Also, officials of the Catholic Church

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<sup>59</sup> Flannery O'Connor, "The Fiction Writer and His Country," n.p., cited in The Added Dimension: The Art and Mind of Flannery O'Connor, edited by Melvin J. Friedman and Lewis A. Lawson (New York, 1966), pp. 251-252. Hereafter cited as Friedman and Lawson, The Added Dimension.

<sup>60</sup> Flannery O'Connor, "A Writer at Home With Her Heritage," n.p., cited in Friedman and Lawson, The Added Dimension, p. 258.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 257.

reject any charge that the church doctrine constricts Flannery O'Connor in her ecumenical view of salvation.

Catholic writers such as Robert Fitzgerald and T.S. Eliot and the Catholic press are among her most perceptive and appreciative critics. Sister Mariella Gable has written in the American Benedictine Review an article entitled "The Ecumenic Core in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor," an article that O'Connor specifically approved. Part of this approval appears in a letter to Sister Mariella in which Flannery O'Connor writes: "I am more and more impressed with the amount of Catholicism that fundamentalist Protestants have been able to retain. Theologically our differences with them are on the nature of the Church, not on the nature of God or our obligations to Him."<sup>62</sup>

From selected passages of Flannery O'Connor's fiction one may appreciate the seriousness of salvation to her characters. Haze Motes realizes his need for Redemption from his guilt when he tells the waitress, "If Jesus existed, I wouldn't be clean."<sup>63</sup> Of course, Haze believes Jesus exists, or he would not so constantly and so loudly denounce Him.

Most Protestants and Catholics now believe that man has free will, that he may choose or reject salvation, but God's

<sup>62</sup> Flannery O'Connor, "Letter to Sister Mariella Gable May 4, 1963," cited in Martin, The True Country, p. 20.

<sup>63</sup> O'Connor, Three by Flannery O'Connor, p. 53.

Redemption encounters the resistance of such self-sufficient people as Mrs. McIntyre, of "The Displaced Person," who remarks about the future: ". . . only the smart thrifty energetic ones are going to survive . . . ." <sup>64</sup> Her idea of religion is that it is for those who do not "have the brains to avoid evil without it. For people like herself, for people of gumption, it [is] a social occasion providing the opportunity to sing." <sup>65</sup>

Rayber once thinks about his nephew, ". . . all I'm trying to do is save you from being a freak." <sup>66</sup> Rayber sees Tarwater's prospective submission to God's call as freakish; thus the non-religious may see the religious, those who seek salvation, as freaks. Instead, modern man, like Rayber, views salvation as "the way you take as a result of being born again the natural way--through your own efforts. Your intelligence." <sup>67</sup> The author remarks, "His words had a disconnected sound." <sup>68</sup>

That rural Southern fundamentalists have a very basic, simple belief in salvation is indicated by large-lettered public warnings to sinners. Rayber and Tarwater see a banner over a Pentecostal tabernacle: "UNLESS YE BE BORN AGAIN YE SHALL NOT HAVE EVERLASTING LIFE." <sup>69</sup> On a roadside boulder

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<sup>64</sup>Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., p. 404.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., p. 418.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., p. 370.

Haze reads: "WOE TO THE BLASPHEMER AND WHOREMONGER! WILL HELL SWALLOW YOU UP?"<sup>70</sup>

Flannery O'Connor has no doctrinal ax to grind with Southern Protestantism as such. She depicts the basic Christian truth of man's fall from grace and his redemption through Christ's death on the Cross. If writing from an orthodox Christian point of view is grinding the ax, then the preeminent Christian writer, Feodor Dostoevsky, must be an ax-grinder.

#### Ethical Inconsistency

Perhaps the most pervasive and deep-seated trait of the rural Southern Protestants as observed by O'Connor is their blindness to their own faults and sins--a kind of complete blacking out of the conscience that Clarence Cason has called the ability to do wrong and not see it as wrong.<sup>71</sup> These wrong-doers live in a kind of ridiculous, transfixed, state of election which makes whatever they do seem to them a part of God's purpose and therefore not only justifiable but admirable.

This rather blatant form of hypocrisy appears in most of the characters sketched by O'Connor, but one of the best examples of the attitude is evident in old Tarwater, who unhesitatingly breaks any kind of human law to preserve what

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>71</sup> Clarence Cason, 90° in the Shade (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1935), p. 57.

he conceives to be God's law. He uses trickery and lies to keep the truant officer from taking his grand-nephew off to school, and sees his deceit not as wrongful evasion of the law but as the righteous fulfillment of God's will:

The truant officer had come only once. The Lord had told the old man to expect it and what to do and old Tarwater had instructed the boy in his part against the day when, as the devil's emissary, the officer would appear.<sup>72</sup>

It never occurs to the old man that civil disobedience at one's discretion can promote chaos.

Furthermore, God's prophet has a whiskey still and sells to the local Negroes. He himself gets drunk, but attempts to teach young Tarwater total abstinence. These inconsistencies apparently pose no moral problem whatever for the old man. But young Tarwater notes the old man's ethical blindness and in pondering on it comes to regard his thoughts as inspired by the Devil. Who else could criticize his God-ridden uncle? "A prophet with a still! He's the only prophet I ever heard of making liquor for a living"<sup>73</sup>--this thought he ascribes to Satan. Apparently O'Connor admires the old man and approves his religious motivation, but she means him to have sin in him even like the prophets of old--Moses, for example.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>72</sup>O'Connor, Three by Flannery O'Connor, p. 313.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., p. 329.

<sup>74</sup>"Moses is spoken of in the Bible as the meekest of all men (Numbers 12:3); but on one occasion he impulsively

Ethical inconsistency appears even more notably in non-religious characters, like Grandma and Red Sammy in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." In Red Sammy's roadside cafe he and his customer Grandma carry on a conversation in which they agree that they stand almost alone as good people in a corrupt and sinful world. Red Sammy says to Grandma: "A good man is hard to find . . . Everything is getting terrible. I remember the day you could go off and leave your screen door unlatched. Not no more."<sup>75</sup> Meanwhile he gruffly orders his wife to get busy waiting on the customers while he loafs, talking to Grandma. Grandma, who is vacationing with her son's family, badgers her son to take an unplanned sidetrip. Against her son's request, she has concealed her cat in the car, and the cat causes a wreck. An escaped, demented killer, The Misfit, appears at the scene of the accident and proceeds to murder the whole helpless family one at a time. Grandma experiences little genuine grief for the deaths of her son and grandson, yet she tells The Misfit, "If you would pray . . . Jesus would

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and vaingloriously struck a rock to bring water out of it, and for this sin he was punished by being forbidden to enter the Promised Land. He was, however, given a glimpse of it from Mount Pisgah, where he died. William Rose Benet, "Moses," The Reader's Encyclopedia, 2nd ed., Vol. 2 (New York, 1965).

<sup>75</sup>O'Connor, Three by Flannery O'Connor, p. 134.

help you."<sup>76</sup> She is unable, however, to pray herself. To win The Misfit's approval in hopes of saving her own life, she agrees with the killer's protest about Christ: "Maybe He didn't raise the dead."<sup>77</sup> She has no qualms about professing Christianity when she thinks it will help her and then, in the next breath, renouncing it when it becomes dangerous or difficult.

Other examples might be mentioned: Mr. Shiflet in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" and Mrs. May in "Greenleaf." Mr. Shiflet with atrocious cruelty cons an automobile from a poor widow, abandons his idiot bride at a roadside cafe, and then mouths sanctimonious preachments to a boy who has run away from home. Mrs. May believes herself to be a socially well-placed, superior, and respectably religious woman. She goes through all the religious forms with punctiliousness and even diligence. Yet, inwardly she is venomously jealous of the tenant farmers who help on her dairy farm, and wants to put in her will that they be cast out when she dies.

#### Faith in the Bible

The fundamentalist interpretation and use of the Bible is a characteristic which no student of rural Southern Protestantism could overlook. O'Connor indicates her

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 142.

awareness that the South is the Bible Belt. A devoted Bible student herself, she expresses regret that her erudite readers of other regions and faiths generally have not the same familiarity with the Bible as that found in the rural fundamentalists:

The fact that Catholics don't see religion through the Bible is a deficiency in Catholics. And I don't think the novelist can discard the instruments he has to plumb meaning just because Catholics aren't used to them. You don't write only for now. The biblical revival is going to mean a great deal to Catholic fiction in the future. Maybe in fifty years, or a hundred, Catholics will be reading the Bible the way they should have been reading it all along. I can wait that long to have my fiction understood. The Bible is what we share with all Jews. This is sacred history and our mythic background. If we are going to discard this we had better quit writing at all. The fact that the South is the Bible Belt is in great measure responsible for its literary preeminence now. The Catholic novelist can learn a great deal from the Protestant South.<sup>78</sup>

O'Connor proceeds to present Bible-oriented people in biblical perspective. About young Tarwater's ride in the truck she says: "He might have been Jonah clinging wildly to the whale's tongue."<sup>79</sup> Then young Tarwater, knowing that his uncle will especially feel the sting of his remark, scorns the old man with: "Now I see what kind of prophet you are. Elijah would think a heap of you."<sup>80</sup> Both Mason

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<sup>78</sup> Flannery O'Connor, "Off the Cuff," n.p., cited in Friedman and Lawson, The Added Dimension, p. 236.

<sup>79</sup> O'Connor, Three by Flannery O'Connor, p. 432.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 319.



Tarwater and the author think that his young nephew is indeed fortunate to have been given a Bible-centered education.

O'Connor makes the following observation:

While other children his age were herded together in a room to cut out paper pumpkins under the direction of a woman, he was left free for the pursuit of wisdom, the companions of his spirit Abel and Enoch and Noah and Job, Abraham and Moses, King David and Solomon, and all the prophets, from Elijah who escaped death, to John whose severed head struck terror from a dish. The boy knew that escaping school was the surest sign of his election.<sup>81</sup>

In a conversation with the Devil, young Tarwater's "friend" the Devil asks him, "What do you know about whores? Where have you ever run up on one of them?"<sup>82</sup> Then Tarwater thinks: "The Bible is full of them. He knew what they were and to what they were liable to come, and just as Jezebel was discovered by dogs, an arm here and a foot there . . . ."<sup>83</sup>

Rural fundamentalists tend to believe that education serves largely to enable one to study the Bible. Haze Motes "had gone to a country school where he had learned to read and write but that it was wiser not to; the Bible was the only book he read."<sup>84</sup>

Mrs. Shortley, in "The Displaced Person," is convinced that Satan is plotting against her. She "started from that day to read her Bible with new attention. She poured over

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<sup>81</sup>Ibid., p. 313.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., p. 327.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

the Apocalypse and began to quote from the Prophets and before long she had come to a deeper meaning of her existence."<sup>85</sup> The characters in Flannery O'Connor often-times reverence the Bible because that is exactly what genuine Southern fundamentalists do. Moreover, through her characters' respect for the Bible she possibly inspires her reader's interest in reading it for himself so that he may better understand both her fiction and the nature of God.

#### Anti-Modernism

The anti-modernism of rural fundamentalists in the South is a trait of which Flannery O'Connor takes due cognizance but which she does not specifically castigate, because she herself shares their distaste for some recent trends in religion. One student of her work has made this observation: "Of no group is she more scornful than the modern intellectuals, particularly those who look on Christianity as merely the paraphernalia of outmoded superstition."<sup>86</sup>

Young Tarwater's uncle, the schoolteacher Rayber in The Violent Bear It Away, "rather pathetically but also comically, opposes the oldtime religion with the new

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<sup>85</sup>Ibid., p. 276.

<sup>86</sup>Robert Drake, Flannery O'Connor: A Critical Essay, edited by Roderick Jellema (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1966), p. 30.

rationalism."<sup>87</sup> Once Rayber tells Old Tarwater to "Ask the Lord why He made him an idiot in the first place, uncle. Tell him I want to know why!"<sup>88</sup> Here Rayber voices a common question of agnostics. Flannery O'Connor could have asked a comparable question about her lupus, but she accepted her disease as God's will. Rayber continues his blasphemous remark by pointing to his idiot son and adding, "As a gesture of human dignity, he'll never be baptized."<sup>89</sup> Then he scornfully asks his uncle about young Tarwater: "Where's the boy you were going to raise into a prophet to burn my eyes clean?"<sup>90</sup> O'Connor follows this question with the words "and he laughed."<sup>91</sup> When old Tarwater comes to live with Rayber and the infant Tarwater, Rayber tells him that he cannot allow him in the house because "this one is going to be brought up to live in the real world. He's going to be brought up to expect exactly what he can do for himself. He's going to be his own savior. He's going to be free!"<sup>92</sup> O'Connor demonstrates through the character of Rayber that the modern disbeliever is anything but free. He is adequate proof that satisfaction and dignity in life do not result

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<sup>87</sup> Fredrick J. Hoffman, "The Search For Redemption," cited in Friedman and Lawson, The Added Dimension, p. 42.

<sup>88</sup> O'Connor, Three by Flannery O'Connor, p. 323.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 345.

from the self-sufficiency which he has tried to achieve. He eventually admits that his anxiety has derived from his refusal to accept Christianity. Old Tarwater's crudity and ignorance blind Rayber to the truth that his prophet-uncle preaches. The fact remains that Rayber is the person with whom the average reader is most likely to identify.

Other modernists and intellectuals (the two seem synonymous in O'Connor's portrayals) do not fare so well as Rayber. Impious, sarcastic, superior Hulga in "Good Country People" deserves the shock she gets from the cool Bible salesman who steals her wooden leg. Asbury, in "The Enduring Chill," is pretty weak and ineffectual as a person--a hypochondriac and a dilettante. His semi-conversion to Catholicism apparently comes too late to help him. The professor son of Mrs. May in "Greenleaf" is equally unimpressive. The general idea left by Flannery O'Connor is that the intellectual Southern Protestant is likely to drift into agnosticism or hypochondria or both. Obviously she prefers the fire and brimstone fundamentalists who shout the "old time" religion.

#### Puritanical Sternness

The early Puritan distrust of pleasure (especially of the flesh), of beauty, and of earthly joy has in a degree been preserved in the rural Protestantism of the South, and Flannery O'Connor's accurate portrayals include some of

this spirit. Old Tarwater's idea of sex as a kind of whoredom is an example. Haze Motes' mother wears black merely out of stern devotion. Parker in "Parker's Back" considers smoking a sin and his Pentecostal wife is much more extreme:

One of the things she did not approve of was automobiles. In addition to her other bad qualities, she was forever sniffing up sin. She did not smoke or dip, drink whiskey, use bad language or paint her face, and God knew some paint would have improved it, Parker thought. Her being against color, [he is heavily tattooed], it was the more remarkable she had married him.<sup>93</sup>

O'Connor's satire here suggests the Protestants' too negative approach to religion and a certain distortion of personality.

Even a "lapsed" Catholic, a sixteen-year-old boy whom Haze hopes to cultivate as his disciple, reflects the South's fundamentalist, stern attitude toward sex. Together they have been to the whorehouse, and the boy "said that what they had done was a mortal sin, and that should they die unrepentant of it they would suffer eternal punishment and never see God."<sup>94</sup> It would seem that O'Connor is suggesting that Catholics in the South share with fundamentalists a deep concern about sin and its danger to salvation. Further, she suggests that like fundamentalists, Catholics do not always succeed in practicing what they believe, as demonstrated

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<sup>93</sup>O'Connor, Everything That Rises Must Converge, p. 187.

<sup>94</sup>O'Connor, Three by Flannery O'Connor, p. 81.

in the conversation between Haze and the boy: Haze "shouted that there was no such thing as sin or judgment, but the boy only shook his head and asked him if he would like to go again the next night."<sup>95</sup>

#### The Power of Satan

In the concept of Satan, rural Southern Protestantism is close to the traditional Puritanism of Milton's century, when the Devil was a very real figure in every man's life. Flannery O'Connor herself believed very strongly in the presence of evil in the world and the undiminished power of Satan. Indeed, she was annoyed that so many of her reader's were unaware of the Devil. On this matter she once said, "I want to be certain that the devil gets indentified as the devil and not simply taken for this or that psychological tendency."<sup>96</sup>

One of O'Connor's characters who believes strongly in the Devil is Mrs. Shortley of "The Displaced Person." Mrs. Shortley believes that the Devil has sent Mr. Guizac and that the priest who brought him to the farm is the Devil's agent. When Mrs. McIntyre remarks about her new Polish tenant farmer, "That man is my salvation,"<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup>Ibid.

<sup>96</sup>John Hawkes, "Flannery O'Connor's Devil," p. 400, cited in Martin, The True Country, p. 72.

<sup>97</sup>O'Connor, Three by Flannery O'Connor, p. 270.

Mrs. Shortley replies, "I would suspicion salvation got from the devil."<sup>98</sup> Mrs. Shortley believes Europe to be "mysterious and evil, the devil's experiment station."<sup>99</sup> About the religion of Europe, and presumably she means the Catholicism of the Poles, she says, "It could only be the devil responsible for that."<sup>100</sup> Fearful of the horrors of European genocide spreading to Georgia, Mrs. Shortley prays, "God save me! . . . from the stinking power of Satan!"<sup>101</sup>

In The Violent Bear It Away the Devil as friend or stranger or the voice "assumes a role quite similar to that of the bad angel in a medieval morality play, appearing throughout the novel to offer evil counsel to Tarwater in hopes of claiming his soul."<sup>102</sup> One of the Devil's sly tricks is his trying to make Tarwater believe that there is no Devil:

You can do one thing or you can do the opposite.

Jesus or the devil, the boy said.

No no no, the stranger [the Devil] said, there ain't no such thing as a devil. I can tell you that from my own self-experience. I know that for a fact. It ain't Jesus or the devil.

It's Jesus or you.

Jesus or me, Tarwater repeated.<sup>103</sup>

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 272.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 276.

<sup>102</sup> Martin, The True Country, p. 77.

<sup>103</sup> O'Connor, Three by Flannery O'Connor, p. 326.

The devil-character created by young Tarwater tries to make him renounce his uncle's faith by counseling thus: "You see he was crazy all along, he continued. Wanted to make a prophet out of that schoolteacher too, but the schoolteacher was too smart for him. He got away."<sup>104</sup> This devil, like the real Devil, suggests that Tarwater interpret things to his advantage and then to rationalize this advantage as God's intention:

You might as well drink all that liquor since you've already drunk so much. Once you pass the moderation mark you've passed it, and that gyration you feel working down from the top of your brain, he said, that's the Hand of God laying a blessing on you. He has given you your release.<sup>105</sup>

The homosexual who picks up Tarwater on the highway is the Devil in the flesh. About him Tarwater thinks: "There was something familiar to him in the look of the stranger but he could not place where he had seen him before."<sup>106</sup>

Subconsciously Tarwater recognizes him as the Devil, and after his rape Tarwater recognizes him consciously. Flannery O'Connor suggests the vampire nature of the Devil by describing the homosexual after the seduction: "His delicate skin had acquired a faint pink tint as if he had refreshed himself on blood."<sup>107</sup>

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 325.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p. 330.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 439.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 441.



There are other symbolic embodiments of the Devil in the fiction of Flannery O'Connor; for example, Manley Pointer, the Bible salesman in "Good Country People." Unaware that she is dealing with the Devil, Hulga believes she can teach this country boy something about life and religion. Ironically, he exposes to her her own naïveté about these matters. Flannery O'Connor incorporates into her fiction the idea of the reality of the Devil, a Catholic belief and a widespread Southern Protestant belief as well; thus, she maintains fidelity to her characters, and demonstrates that man must struggle against opposing forces for his Redemption. Hence, Redemption, the core of her fiction, has more dramatic interest.

#### The Supernatural and Apocalyptic

There is not so much of the supernatural, as it is ordinarily thought of, in Flannery O'Connor's Protestants as there is of the apocalyptic. The supernatural, in fact, is mainly confined to trance-like religious experiences in which characters face God or the Devil and carry on conversations. Sometimes they see visions, perhaps apocalyptic or prophetic visions. O'Connor nearly always indicates the purely visionary nature of such manifestations and almost never do they play an important part in the plot as they do, for instance, in the Gothic fiction of Poe. A particular example of this visionary type of experience is, as has

already been mentioned, Young Tarwater's debate with the Devil; and of course, Old Tarwater is full of visions and prophetic announcements. Another instance is the frightened half-dream of O. E. Parker in "Parker's Back." Parker attempts to please his strict and narrowly religious wife by having a picture of Christ tattooed on his back. An accident in which Parker nearly gets killed causes him to become really more conscious of God, Death, and Heaven. Recuperating, he sees the great Byzantine eyes of Christ tattooed on his back. The eyes burn through him like the thought of Redemption. This vision is a rather typical experience, with strong religious overtones. Such semi-visions, almost metaphorical, occur at the end of "The Temple of the Holy Ghost," "The Enduring Chill," and "A Circle in the Fire."

#### Ignorance and Emotionalism

Flannery O'Connor's religious rural characters have had little schooling, have lived all their lives in the South, and are prone to become emotional over religious matters. This type of rural Southerner is quite common, but it is to be questioned whether in the past two or three decades of radio and television much backwardness and provincialism, at least, have not begun to disappear, the result being that occasionally O'Connor portrayals of ignorance seem somewhat overdone, perhaps for the sake of humor.

Mrs. Greenleaf, in "Greenleaf," is an ignorant and emotional woman who practices "prayer healing." Every day she cuts "morbid stories" from the newspaper and takes them to the woods and buries them. Then she falls on the ground over them and mumbles and groans for an hour or so, ". . . moving her huge arms back and forth under her and out again and finally just lying down flat and, Mrs. May suspected, going to sleep in the dirt."<sup>108</sup>

It will be recalled that Haze Motes had learned that it was wiser not to read, and he had spent most of his life avoiding all books except the Bible.<sup>109</sup> Mr. Shiflet, another ignoramus, has an ingenious explanation of automobile costs and manufacture:

You take now, he said, one man puts in one bolt and another man puts in another bolt and another man puts in another bolt and so that it's a man for a bolt. That's why you have to pay so much for a car: you're paying all those men. Now if you didn't have to pay but one man, you could get you a cheaper car and one that had had a personal interest taken in it, and it would be a better car. The old woman agreed with him that this was so.<sup>110</sup>

In Wise Blood, the disillusioned former fanatic Asa Hawks is irritated by Haze Motes' religious fanaticism and calls Haze a "Goddam Jesus-hog."<sup>111</sup> In the same novel,

<sup>108</sup> O'Connor, Everything That Rises Must Converge, p. 49.

<sup>109</sup> O'Connor, Three by Flannery O'Connor, p. 17.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., pp. 164-165.

Sabbath Lily Hawks, who has never been proselyted like Tarwater and Haze, sees religion as an emotional explosion. She is speaking about Haze to her father Asa, a one-time religious zealot:

"Well, look what you used to be," she said.  
 "Look what you tried to do. You got over it and so will he."<sup>112</sup>

The ignorance and provincialism of Mrs. Shortley are amusingly colossal. Her trouble with foreign names is perhaps typical. She first calls the Guizacs "Gobblehooks," and the name Sledgewig "sounded to Mrs. Shortley like something you would name a bug, or vice versa, as if you named a boy Bollweevil."<sup>113</sup> Mrs. Shortley figures that since the Poles cannot speak English, they will be unable to distinguish the unmatched curtains in their living quarters. She also expects the Poles to practice cruelty in America because they have been persecuted in Europe. In comparing Georgia with Europe, she explains, "Over here it's more advanced than where they come from."<sup>114</sup> In complete seriousness she asks about Mr. Guizac, "You reckon he can drive a tractor when he don't know English?"<sup>115</sup>

The ungrammatical conversational idiom of such people as The Misfit in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," Haze Motes,

<sup>111</sup>Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>112</sup>Ibid.

<sup>113</sup>Ibid., p. 263.

<sup>114</sup>Ibid., p. 266.

<sup>115</sup>Ibid., p. 268.

the Tarwaters, Mr. Shiflet, and other minor characters indicates a lack of knowledge of acceptable standards of usage and no interest in obtaining such knowledge. Here again this view of the rural South is open to question, for some of the most highly educated and educable people have come from Southern farms.

### Self-Flagellation

Self-flagellation has been more characteristic of certain primitive Catholic groups than characteristic of Protestants. The Penitentes of New Mexico and the Flagellantes of the Philippines are examples. The long, knee-crawling ordeals of penitent Mexicans before the shrines of the Virgin of Guadalupe are further evidence of the Catholic nature of this practice.

There are, however, in the South certain rather similar aspects among the humble and illiterate, especially the Pentecostals. Young Tarwater smears over his face the dirt of his uncle's grave. Haze Motes fills his shoes with rocks in order to suffer, and wears barbed wire around his chest. Both of these characters are basically sympathetic, as might be expected of a Catholic writer to whom this sort of practice might seem less distasteful.

The punishments rural Southern Protestants are most likely to inflict upon themselves are those of the guilty

conscience, which are perhaps less bearable than physical pains. It is just this area of the guilty conscience which O'Connor fails to explore thoroughly in her fiction. Her redemptive transformations seem oftentimes marvelously hasty if they come at all, and the suffering seldom shows.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

Flannery O'Connor's fictional representation of Southern Protestantism is, in its surface realism, reasonably faithful to fact as set forth by W. F. Cash, Clarence Cason, Thomas D. Clark, and others. It is correct to say, as do most of O'Connor's critics, that "she took a cold, hard look at human beings, and she set down with marvelous precision what she saw [*italics mine*]." <sup>1</sup> What Flannery O'Connor saw no doubt exists in the South; but her gaze is so fixed upon the extremes of Southern Protestantism--both the ultra liberals and the extreme fundamentalists--that she overlooks a large and growing body of Protestants who are neither fundamentalists nor intellectual rejectors of religion. Readers of other regions and other faiths sometimes may assume that the intellectual Southern Protestant is intrinsically anti-religious, because the intellectual and even the merely literate Protestants in Flannery O'Connor's fiction tend to be scornful and atheistic or blatantly hypocritical. Intellectually inclined characters such as Rayber, Hulga, and

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<sup>1</sup>Granville Hicks, "A Cold Hard Look at Humankind," Saturday Review, XLVIII (May 29, 1965), 23.

Asbury display a little too militantly the anti-religious feeling that Flannery O'Connor considers a part of their make-up. They are literate, intelligent, and self-reliant; thus, according to O'Connor, they must be Satan's fools.

Another assumption that many readers of O'Connor's fiction may likely and justifiably make is that the truly religious Southern Protestant is gauche, if not crazy. Flannery O'Connor seems to intend for her reader to understand that the intense religiosity of most of her Southern fundamentalists is not in itself blameworthy and that the doubters and scoffers are possibly more grotesque than those whom they scorn. On the other hand her satirical caricature-like presentation of such semi-fanatics as old Tarwater and Haze Motes substantially cancels the sympathy which she purports to feel. The final result is an unresolvable and sometimes annoying ambiguity. For example, the average reader (especially the large middle group of Protestants all over the country) will tend to identify with Mrs. May in "Greenleaf" rather than with Mrs. Greenleaf, who is a lazy, ignorant, emotional and fanatical prayer-healer. Such astute critics as liberal Protestant Granville Hicks find almost no compassion in Flannery O'Connor's fiction. Where Hicks pities her Grace-rejecting characters as people who have made unfortunate mistakes, he realizes that O'Connor believes that they get the Hellfire they deserve. Further, he states that although she was not a pessimist, she painted a darker



picture of the world than any pessimist in his acquaintance.<sup>2</sup> If it is thus difficult for the reader to identify with O'Connor's sincerely Christian characters, then he fails to get at the inner life of Southern Protestantism. Hence he will not love with it, rejoice with it, communicate with its Christ in its own style; rather he will realize Southern Protestantism as he does through non-fiction--rationally, not both emotionally and rationally.

Flannery O'Connor uses her rural Southern Protestants as a metaphor for her vision and theology, which are, of course, Catholic. Christ stands at the heart of the Protestant and Catholic doctrines of salvation, and He stands at the heart of her fiction. If the reader succeeds in perceiving some of the authentic spirit of Christ that underlies O'Connor's grotesques, he has indeed found a truth of universal significance--that Christ died to redeem mankind from an earthly as well as eternal Hell. Carter W. Martin believes that only the truly religious reader will understand Flannery O'Connor.<sup>3</sup> He says also that the morally neutral reader will misunderstand her fiction, but

to the reader with a sound background in modern literature and an orthodox understanding of Christocentric religion, O'Connor's work will be understood for what it is--a unique and forceful body of fiction based upon the profound yet simple

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 23-24.

<sup>3</sup>Carter W. Martin, The True Country: Themes in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor (Nashville, Tennessee, 1969), p. 241.

verities that have been the focal point of Western thought for almost two thousand years.<sup>4</sup>

Religious truths more readily absorbed by readers are the insights Flannery O'Connor gives into the universal problems of ethical inconsistency, hypocrisy, and pride. Both the religious and the non-religious can profit from her heavy emphasis on biblical allusion. For the Bible is not only God's Word but also great literature.

Flannery O'Connor chose to write about rural Southern Protestants for several reasons. The most obvious is that they compose her milieu, and writers generally write best, as did William Faulkner, about the place and the people they know best. Second, the rural Southern fundamentalist is dramaturgic because of his literal wrestling with the Lord, and she wanted to catch what she saw. Her interest was her characters' inner life, but her talent lay in surface or dramatic representation. Third, she seldom wrote about the religious struggles of her fellow Catholic Southerners presumably because she found them less grotesque and because unfavorable representation would have brought protest from the Church itself. Apparently, Flannery O'Connor disliked controversy of any kind, for she remained publicly silent on the racial issue. Complaints from local Protestants about her representation of them she tended to dismiss as superfluous. Fourth, her own interest in religion was part and

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 241-242.

parcel of that of the people in the Bible Belt; it was, therefore, natural for her to write of these strangely religious phenomena which she constantly observed about her.

Flannery O'Connor, as an orthodox Catholic, feels ill at ease with her rural fundamentalists and their anti-Catholicism, their shouting, and their jerking; nevertheless she notes the many affinities she finds between Southern Protestantism and her own faith. She approves the high degree to which many Southern Protestants have had genuine religious experience, and she especially admires the resistance Southern Protestantism has offered to modernism, one of her greatest phobias. Flannery O'Connor is a masterful story teller, and through this mastery she may successfully and profitably share with readers not only her pleasure in a good story but also with some readers the treasure that is Christian faith.

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