CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The character of each literature is predicated on the urgencies and contingencies located in the spiritual and moral life of the people.\textsuperscript{1}

Flannery O' Connor is universally acknowledged as a committed and a creative artist. She employs quite distinctly and in a unique manner her writing capacities and artistic potentialities to project admirably her feelings, thoughts and experiences concerning the doctrines governing Roman Catholic religion. She is adequately qualified by her Christian sentiments and Christian orientation to poignantly argue that Jesus Christ is ever the Pursuer. She argues further that Jesus Christ is ever the Saviour of the faithful and the unfaithful too. O' Connor has an abiding faith in Jesus Christ, and she cannot visualize a Church without Jesus Christ.

It should be stressed that she does not permit her Christian notions to obtrude and thereby restrict her two novels and thirty-one short fictions to a constricted domain. On the other hand, she emerges out of her Christian base and presents universals and
strongly argues for humanism. In fact, it is her universals and humanistic concerns that endow her works with that ever-lasting quality. At the same time, paradoxically, enough, one can never ignore her abiding faith in Christ and the doctrines governing Catholic Religion. In fact, her deep faith in Christ and Catholic religion and her humanism overlap and continue throughout her work.

Flannery O’Connor is a gifted artist endowed with immense writing capacities. All the same she has equipped herself with first hand and second hand knowledge. She has streamlined her acquired scholarship. She admirably clarifies religion, love, life, and transcendence, with a rare writing vigour and vitality.

With sound sense, artistic sensibility, strong religious conviction, she stands out as a committed artist writing works mainly to guide, train, educate, instruct and lead the equally committed readers on the right lines. The novelist measures herself up to the requirements of the American Scholar as enunciated by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, and Kenneth Burke. She possessed streamlined scholarship, remarkable powers of observation, writing capacities, language skills, rich vocabulary and verbal brilliance to express her feelings, thoughts and experiences in a unique, original and convincing style. Above all
with functional vocabulary, and variation of tools and with immense commitment she introduces her religious purpose sense.

Flannery O' Connor is a confirmed Catholic. As such she is identified as the outstanding Catholic writer. She is basically a creative artist displaying originality in her work. The novelist introduces Roman Catholic religious concepts skillfully, creatively and imaginatively. The perceptive reader surely detects craftswomanship and technical virtuosity in her. Her American ingenuity is revealed in the wonderful passages spread throughout her writings, in her narrative strategies and in her effective dialogue writing. A slice of reality or the actual human condition provides the gist but it is the creative imagination that gives her fiction flesh and blood.

The fact of the matter is that out of reality are the tales of imagination fashioned by the catholic writer. Like Thomas Stearns Eliot, she moved towards serious art, began early and later was much obsessed by death as a reality. And it is a strong spiritual concept.

Craftsmanship is an attribute of a great writer. She is a master of her art. Her craftswomanship lies in marrying inspiration with expression, in employing rhetorical flourishes, developmental
patterns, and above all a capacity to revise. Constant revisions result in perfectionalism and complexity. Her personal idioms and her poetic statements add beauty, charm and strength to her fiction. On every page of her two novels and her other works she has left her indelible signature. Her art products are demanding and should be read and re-read as one reads a good poem.

Flannery O' Connor, the American artist-genius, has become one of the most distinctive and outstanding women writers in her short life span of thirty-nine years. Her two fictions, Wise Blood and The Violent Bear It Away and her thirty-one short fictions in two short-story collections entitled, A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Everything That Rises Must Converge depict the limits of worldly wisdom and the mysteries of divine grace in the stiff Protestant South.

The fictionist's posthumously published collection of letters entitled, The Habit of Being, is one of the greatest collection of letters, equal in range and quality to those of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville. Her letters are also comparable to the Notebooks and Prefaces of Henry James in which Henry James talks about the art of fiction and the craft of writing. Michael True's
observation also deserves mention here: those letters of the author favor comparison with the journals of Henry David Thoreau.²

The novelist remains was a Roman Catholic Christian moralist. And her poignant apocalyptic fiction is central to the American Renaissance. She was an artist of the most exacting and universal perception. Her conception and artistic treatment of good and evil has been paralleled with that of Nathaniel Hawthorne and her recourse to the grotesque has been likened to that of Fyodor Dostoevsky and that of Nathaniel West and her satire to that of Jonathan Swift and Juvenal.

She was by birth and faith a Roman Catholic. She lived much of her life in the heart of the Southern Protestant Bible Belt. Her characters are set in the small towns and backwoods of the Southern Protestant Bible Belt. She uses characters and scenes from her native environment to comment on the issue of modern laxity as far as spirituality and the drifting away from spirituality are concerned.

In the intense and often violent religiosity of the Protestants, she sees spiritual life as bizarre and extreme in its manifestations. The locale of her fiction is narrow and can be called regional though the issues raised by her are universal. Incidentally, it is her regionalism that helps her to grow as the American woman artist
governed by American ingenuity and American nationalism. Moreover, it is spirit of nationalism that enables her to emerge as the writer capable of introducing universals and humanistic concerns, which alone endow her works with that lasting quality.

The concerns evidenced by the author in her fiction are best summarized in her own words, when she described her conception of the Catholic fiction thus:

The Catholic novel can't be categorized by subject matter but only by what it assumes about human and divine reality. It cannot see him totally as depraved. It will see him as incomplete in himself, as prone to evil, but as redeemable when his own efforts are assisted by grace. And it will see this grace as working through nature, but as entirely transcending it so that a door is always open to possibility and the unexpected in the human soul. Its center of meaning will be Christ; its center of destruction will be the devil. No matter how this view of life may be
fleshed out, these assumptions form its skeleton.  

This Thesis attempts at discerning the theological implications which lie far beneath the literal surface of Flannery O’ Connor’s fiction.

Flannery O’ Connor remains the first fiction writer of outstanding talent to explore that rural South through the eyes of Roman Catholic orthodoxy. The artist’s theological implications are the touchstones on which the writer built her vision of faith and reality as she revealed that vision to her readers in her two novels and thirty-one short stories.

It ought to be stressed that her first fiction Wise Blood it is the story of Hazel Motes from the deserted town of Eastrod. He journeys to the city of Taulkinham and preaches the anti-Gospel for his Church Without Christ. And Tarwater, the protagonist of The Violent Beat It Away, is equally possessed by his backwood’s religion, background and struggles.

Many of her short fictions are set in the Southern milieu. Her characters make up a small world of the Blacks, farm workers and petty employees.
Louis D. Rubin, Jr., observes as follows:

The Southern milieu in which her art is set...is not only part and parcel of her fiction but significantly modifies and shapes the fiction. 

Her fiction abounds in grotesque situations and many of the memorable characters are driven as "possessed" individuals. Freaks fanatics, and psychopaths stalk the unfriendly streets and desolate clay roads of her fictional world.

All the characters in her poignant stories are abnormal. Hazel Motes in Wise Blood is presented as the epitome of the grotesque vision of the world. Rayber's alienation from the world is suggested by the grotesque description of his appearance in the fiction, The Violent Bear It Away. The intellectual pride in Hulga in "Good Country People" and Sheppard in "The Lame Shall Enter First" debase the individual and turn them grotesques.

In fact, she considered the value of exaggeration as an adjunct of the grotesques. Baptism in The Violent Bear It Away attains a kind of emotional recognition of its existence only through distortions and melodrama.
Her penchant for freaks, idiots and cripples, her fascination for the morbid, macabre and monstrous are traits that she shares with many Southern writers. The same Gothic vein can be detected in varying degrees in Erkkine Caldwell, Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, William Goyen, and Truman Capote as well as in William Faulkner.

The fictionist employed the grotesque quite deliberately to express her vision of reality. In her viewpoint, Christians who do not care for redemption have a distortion, which is a more serious distortion than the physical disabilities or the mental disorders – *psychic dementia* of her characters. Andre Bleikstan comments that

(In Flannery O’ Connor) the grotesque has the power of revelation; it manifests the irruption of the demonic in man and brings to light the terrifying face of a world literally disfigured by evil.  

Another interesting factor about her fiction is that her inclusion of Roman Catholicism in her short fictions is infrequent, and almost coincidental. She does not rely on Roman Catholicism to project the religious view of the Catholic Church. Most of the protagonists of Flannery O’ Connor are Protestants from the Southern Bible Belt.
The Protestants she confronted in her life-time became the focus of her attention. She herself explains that Catholics with intensity of belief join convents and seminaries to be heard no more whereas intense Protestant believers, "express their faith in diverse kind of dramatic action, which is obvious enough to catch. I cannot write anything subtle".  

She believed that good writing is never accidental. To her, good writing, further, begins at home. Moreover, it ought to be emphasized that the artist in her and the Roman Catholic faith imbibed by her never clashed with each other. In fact, they complement and strengthen each other.

Furthermore, she is sensitive to the human situation, sensitive to all that man is capable of undergoing and achieving. As such she is at once a Roman Catholic religionist and a sensitive humanist. The artistic manner in which she presents man at the centre of a disastrously torn world makes her a supreme artist-cum-religionist. In fact, her works carry the strains of Roman Catholicism and secularism.

It is interesting to record that the mind of Francis Thompson and Flannery O' Connor operate on the same wavelengths when they argue with great sanctity that Jesus Christ is the Pursuer. This
is the main burden of Francis Thompson’s “The Hound of Heaven” and the complete works of this catholic writer. She strongly believed that Jesus Christ pursues the faithful and the unfaithful and redeems them. This religious truth (which in Hindu parlance is Marjara Nyaya) qualifies the works of the artist.

Her characters are grotesques as well as sinners, both at one. The novelist in her fictions deals with all the manifestations of evil, guilt, crime, isolation, sin, failure, violence, betrayal, sufferings, squalor, corruption, childhood traumas, and adult perversions. And evil does take grotesque proportions in her works. The point of view and the right perspective of a fictionist depend upon his or her gender. Being highly religious - a staunch Roman Catholic by faith - and though not a confirmed feminist, she fails not to project her studied feminist perspectives.

She decries in a forthright frank manner the patriarchal approach and the masculine culture which are aimed at keeping the women in a continual state of dependency. She condemned the male chauvinists for depriving, denying and dehumanizing the women and for keeping the women under a continual state of suppression and oppression. The novelist in her works tries to break up the Southern tradition in which women aspire to be the pedestal
passivity of beauty queen, their debutante life. She writes on this matter with a belligerence not seen in many White women writers.

Sometimes her short fictions produce a litany of ugly women like Mary Grace in "Revelation" and Hulga in "Good Country People". Some of her short fictions imply the dominance of masculine forces in society. Asbury in "The Enduring Chill’ and Thomas in “Comforts of Home”, feel an aversion towards female characters, thus suggesting the masculine culture and male chauvinistic attitude. Sometimes she inverts the stereotypes of women in short fictions such as “Good Country People” and “The Displaced Person”.

In her fictions and short fictions she presents a sacramental view of life. The sacramental view provides man's discovery of his place in the divine scheme of salvation, the recognition and acceptance of grace. The major characters in most of her short fictions, and in her two short fictions, Wise Blood and The Violent Bear It Away, are brought to the realization of their own guilt and the grace offered through the vision. It ought to be stressed that for her, "the meaning of life is centered in our redemption by Christ". 7

Resurrection is implied in all final actions. In the short fiction “The Judgement Day” there is evocation of joy and spiritual triumph
out of the material world that is otherwise pathetic, ugly, and violent. Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood* blinds himself in anticipation of his redemption after life. Francis Marion Tarwater makes it his first mission to baptize Bishop the idiot child of his atheist-teacher and his general mission is “to warn the children of God of the terrible speed of justice”.

The very titles of the short fictions “Revelation”, “Judgement Day” and “A Temple of The Holy Ghost” have allegorical overtones. The eschatological perspective is obvious in her writings.

Raised in a respected and well placed family in Milledgeville that was concerned with keeping property values and hierarchies in place, she observed Southern conventions and adhered to the traditional prejudices and etiquette of the White Southern elite. She was pressurized by her mother to act the part of a polite Southern lady even when she became an invalid. To understand her perfectly and correctly one must appreciate something about her heritage. Alice Walker presents vivid images of her heritage.

Every Spring season, with great pomp and solemnity, the Clive House, was opened to the public eager to know the upper class origins of their past. At Peabody Public High School, she produced paintings, cartoons, poetry, and prose. She wrote short,
secret books about her day-to-day family life. "My Relatives" offers funny sketches of aunts and uncles. "Don't Touch" was the title of her personal journal. Her weakness in spelling was compensated by her originality. She was awarded a Rinehart Fellowship to the Writer's Workshop at the University of Iowa, in 1945. She dropped her first name "Mary" and became Flannery O'Connor.

In the Winter of 1950, when she was twenty-five, she came down with disseminated lupus crythematous, a debilitating and painful disease which had killed her father. She confronted the severity of the disease with good cheer and great dignity. She required months of extraordinary medical attention and needed daily inoculations of cortisone. Nevertheless, lupus crythematous changed her life and she was compelled to spend the rest of her days under her mother's care. She arranged her life around her craft demanding several undisturbed hours for writing every morning. During the years of her great productivity, her dependence on Regina O'Connor's affection, strength and organizational skill was absolute.

Sally Fitzgerald gives an account of Flannery O'Connor's interests and habits in her introduction to The Habit of Being. When her illness was put under control, she set about building a life with
her mother, under Regina’s care, at Andalusia. In the farmhouse she brought up peafowls, tended chickens, Muscovy ducks, Chinese geese and one-eyed swans. She mentions this and her mother’s farming adventures in her letters. They had visitors and friends.

Flannery O’Connor went to Europe, though not unwillingly and was even glad to get home. Understandably reading was one of her great pleasures and interests in her life. She exchanged books with friends and commentaries in turn. She was fond of discussing theology and ideas related to life. She projected herself as a striking apologist for Catholicism. Her real love for Christianity and for the Church as its guardian is inescapable in her letters.

She lived in a region that was thrilled to resist violence and danger despite its post-war sophistication and growing urbanity. The White Southerners of her era struggled to enforce sharp demarcations between genders, between classes and most brutally between races. Although she satirizes this world in her fiction, in public she would not take a stand. She does not share her region’s dream of a glamorous Southern past.

While Allen Tate insists that Southern literature is respectfully conscious of the poet’s endurance in the present, her characters are most at risk when they try to recapture the past as in Everything
That Rises Must Converge and A Good Man Is Hard to Find. Her vision of the Southern present is very bleak. Although she resolutely believed in integration and one who recognized the plights and the predicaments of the Southern Blacks, she also accepted the most painful of the Southern conventions. She had contacts with many of her contemporary literary figures.

In 1952, she and Alice Walker, the African American woman artist, were neighbours in Baldwin country. They were separated by an age difference of twenty-five years, racial disparity and economic situation. But Alice Walker read the works of Flannery O’ Connor with deep interest. At Iowa she worked with Robert Penn Warren, Paul Engle and Andrew Lytle. Paul Engle compared her to John Keats. Engle spoke with a thick cockney accent, but wrote English sentences as clear and delicious as spring water. Her dialect was as vivid and difficult as her scribbling was amazing.

At this time she came into contact with Caroline Gordon, a Catholic novelist, who was thirty years elder to her and married to Allen Tate. Caroline Gordon safeguarded and cherished the writings of Flannery O’ Connor for the rest of her life. She read the book, Art and Scholasticism written by Jacques Maritain and learned the conception related to the habit of art. She sought company and
enjoyed it. She participated in the lives of her best friends, interested herself in their children, their work, their adventures and their health. The world of the absurd delighted her.

Letter writing was an important art work for her. She exchanged letters with John Kawkes, Cecil Dawkins, Jacques Maritain, Thomas Mckane, Robert Lowell, Sally and Robert Fitzgerald and Sister Mariella Gable. In her letters she discussed matters of social and literary interests. Her collection of letters bears testimony to her friendship and literary habits and tastes and predilections. Sally Fitzgerald points out that

I (Sally Fitzgerald) felt her (Flannery O' Connor's) living presence in them. Their tone, their content, and even the number and range of those she corresponded with revealed the vivid life in her, and much of the quality of a personality often badly guessed at.  

It ought to be noted that she strongly believed in the truth that fiction must be governed by ethos. In other words every fiction must reflect on the moral significance of what it communicates. Fiction or short fiction should embody the concept of the soul of man, because man does not live by bread alone.
At this juncture, it ought to be stressed that Christian parallels, Christian ethics, and Christian reference abound in her works. She felt that a narrative was flawed if the author failed to reveal a moral judgement. She argues thus: I (Flannery O' Connor) see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy.¹¹

One can also detect a recurring and dominating theme running through all her short stories - it is that of innocence versus evil and innocence victimized by evil. There is also a reformation of character in her fiction.

It ought to be mentioned that writers are influenced by the ethos of their age. At the same time for their part they also contribute to the strength and validity of ethos and moral significance of their age. The seventeenth century was concerned with reason; the eighteenth century with nature; the nineteenth century with science. And the modern world is concerned with human predicament. As such this creative American artist responds to the beliefs and conventions of her age.

Her mind and imagination were formed in the Catholicism preached from American pulpits, taught in parochial schools and whispered in confessionals. She being a modern American woman writer is concerned with human predicament and represents in her
works man's universal experience. This inclusive vision embraces all
dark realities of life. An individual or society is selected in fiction to
represent the predicament of human kind in the particular
circumstances. And the reader through reader participation is invited to
identify himself with the situation.

Her short fiction, "The Enduring Chill", has a wry, affectionate
portrait of a Father Finn, which hits off the type that America Jansenism
has so often produced. Being half blind and half deaf Father Finn is able
to keep faith and administer Sacraments. She suggests the need only
for such priests in an age of the wreck of the faith.

Adjustment to modern life is a characteristic problem of our time,
and her characters confront it. Sabbath Lily in Wise Blood faces it.
Nelson in “A Circle in the Fire” adopts Head’s racist view of the city. In
her short fictions, she stresses the importance of community and the
simple greatness of love that might help people to adjust to the
demands of the modern world.

Violence in her works reflects a more modern brutality. It is only
through acts of violence that her characters ventilate their mute fury. At
the beginning of the twentieth century, Virginia Woolf lashed at Bennett,
Galsworthy and Wells for their materialism. The characters of Virginia
Woolf and E. M. Forster are civilized, intelligent, and sensitive but they
have no souls. These novelists have no vision of salvation; there is nothing left except to have the victim cremated and the victim's ashes scattered.

Catholic writers concentrate on the larger issues such as damnation and salvation. Flannery O’Connor is prominent among the Catholic writers and the fictions of the Catholic writers are soul deep. Her art products projects characters, situations and beliefs and subjects them to perfect fictional treatment. She reminds the readers on every page that the man, however badly he behaves, has an immortal soul; that the alternative salvation or damnation is the greatest reality. Man is blackened by the brush of sin and is redeemed by the Water of Baptism.

At this juncture it should be stressed that her discourse is eschatological. Obsession with sin and its consequent mental conflict and suffering are prominent in her works. She aims at instinctive reformation in character. Belief in God and trust in His ways are the solutions suggested by her in her works.

Many critics have detected a similarity of pattern in her art products. This similarity of pattern arises largely from her invariably Christian perspective upon the characters and their actions. Many of her short fictions dramatize the sinfulness and the need for grace in man.
Characters arrive at their epiphanies and recognize the need for repentance. They accept or ignore the spiritual need. Harry Ashfield in "The River", Julian in *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, Mr. Head and Nelson in "The Artificial Nigger" and Mrs. Flood in *Wise Blood* experience the knowledge of God's grace even from innocence or ignorance.

The Sacraments by implication or explication are represented in her short fictions. Baptism in "The River", Confirmation in "A Temple of Holy Ghost", Matrimony in "A Stroke of Good Fortune" Extreme Unction in "The Displaced Person" and Penance in "The Enduring Child". In her fictions, the murderous, psychic cripples, freaks, and the brutal men have a sense of sin and therefore think about God. In fact, her fictions and short fictions are Christian-oriented to the core.

An artist is one who redefines life. He is a different kind of a person observing even the minutia of life. Her fictions and short fictions are artistic and religious. The point that is made here is that her Catholicism does not hinder her being a good artist. She argues on this point thus: "Because I (Flannery O' Connor) am a Catholicl cannot afford to be less than an artist".¹²
She preferred to call her works romances. The romance provides for a deeper kind of realism because it permits the distortion of reality for the purpose of emphasizing external truths. She argues that only external reality can be distorted as grotesques but the internal reality must not be violated. The world of romance is often a world of symbols and allegory. As a creative artist she is particular about a precise and vivid delineation of character in fiction. Melvin J. Friedman observes: "There is in her (Flannery O'Connor) Dickensian devotion to oddities of character". 13

Her fictions and short fictions are narrow in range but wide in their appeal. A creative writer employs words as tools to convey his matter and meaning. His word-pictures are life-like. He transforms even the ordinary into fire words. The writer employs words skillfully and achieves marvellous results. A study of the vocabulary and choice of diction used by her is quite rewarding.

She has chosen the names purposely and carefully for her characters and the places that she describes. Her choice of names for her characters is effective. The titles of her fictions and short fictions are so very apt and exact and ideally suit the context. The titles of her works are also sharp and pointed.
Sometimes the Christian theme is designated by the title itself. The following are classic examples: "A Temple of Holy Ghost", "A Circle in the Fire", "Revelation", "The Lame Shall Enter First" and "River". The titles of the two fiction Wise Blood and The Violent Bear It Away have Biblical connotations.

"The Judgement Day" suggests eschatological perspective. Bishop, the name of the idiot-child, in The Violent Bear It Away has ironical significance. The Old Testament names in "Parker's Back" such as Sarah, Ruth, and Obadiah Elihue point to the religious issues at stake.

The symbolic value of the names Mrs. May and Sheppard is obvious in "The Lame Shall Enter First". Claize Katz Comments that "she was a woman, an intellectual a writer with meticulous concern for words". The artist reveals her remarkable talent for narrative strategies, and descriptive excellence.

Thus, she projects herself as an accomplished and ingenious American woman writer marked by great commitment.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


