Chapter I

INTRODUCTION
Mary Flannery O'Connor, American short-fiction writer, novelist, and essayist, was born in Savannah, Georgia, on 25 March 1925. She was the only child of Regina L. Cline and Edward Francis O'Connor, Jr. Her parents came from families that were prominent in two of the major enclaves of Roman Catholic society within the fundamentalist environs of Georgia. The O'Connor's were well known in Savannah and the Clines were a prominent family in the state, Regina Cline's father having been mayor of Milledgeville for many years. Flannery O'Connor's father, whom she later referred to as Ed — just as she often calls her mother by her first name — had served in the army as a lieutenant. He worked in real estate and was active in Savannah politics and the American Legion. Mary Flannery O'Connor grew up as rather a solitary child until she attended parochial school. She loved pet fowl all her life.

The thesis focuses on O'Connor's twenty-five short stories and two novels. Flannery's character is in many respects attributable to her father: "I am never likely to romanticize him," she writes to a close friend, "because I carry around most of his faults as well as his tastes." In an early notebook, O'Connor kept when she was twelve; she posted this warning to unwanted readers on the first page: "I know some folks that don't mind their own bsnis." Her sensitivity can be discerned in retrospect through a comment she made about her father: "He needed the people I guess and got them. Or rather wanted them and got them. I wanted them and didn't. We are all rather blessed in our deprivations if we let ourselves be, I suppose."
In 1938 Edward O'Connor was discovered to have disseminated lupus, an incurable disease in which the body forms antibodies to its own tissues. The O'Connors moved to Milledgeville, to the Cline house in the centre of town. At Peabody High School, Mary Flannery O'Connor was lively as well as studious. She wrote and illustrated books, and in her senior year she listed her hobby in the yearbook as "Collecting rejection slips." Edward O'Connor died on 1 February 1941, when Flannery was 15. Mary Flannery O'Connor graduated from high school the next year, and enrolled in the Women's College of Georgia in Milledgeville. At college Mary Flannery majored in English and Social science in 1945.

Moreover, Mary Flannery O'Connor took on the name Flannery O'Connor, dropping Mary from her signature. A fellowship enabled her to attend the Writers' Workshop at the State University of Iowa, from which she received a Master of Fine Arts degree in 1947. Mary Flannery worked as the art editor of the student newspaper, The Colonnade, the college's literary quarterly, and the feature editor of her senior yearbook, in which her cartoons appeared regularly. She wrote fiction for the literary quarterly The Corinthian, but she thought of herself primarily as a cartoonist. The college's faculty elected her to the Phoenix Society, its version of Phi Beta Kappa, during the fall quarter of her senior year, which tells us that she was in the top seven percent of her class. Time, review of "The Complete Stories," 1971 collection brings together for the first time in one books all of Miss O'Connor's stories.

O'Connor described herself as a "pigeon-toed child with a receding chin and a you-leave-me-alone-or-I'll-bite-you complex." She spent the remaining 14 years of
her life at Andalusia writing. She raised various kinds of fowl, including peacocks. She loved pet fowl all her life. When O'Connor was six, she experienced her first brush with celebrity. The Pathé News people filmed "Little Mary O'Connor" with her trained chicken, and showed the film around the country. She said, "When I was six I had a chicken that walked backward .... I was in it too with the chicken. I was just there to assist the chicken but it was the high point in my life. Everything since has been anticlimax." O'Connor, incidentally, used the peacock as a major symbol when she explains in a letter to Janet McKane, "The eyes in the tail stood for the eyes of the Church." She stayed on at the university for another year, and then went to Yaddo, where she beg her first novel, Wise Blood, and later moved to an apartment hotel in New York.

In New York, she became friendly with two other literary Roman Catholics, Robert and Sally Fitzgerald. When they bought a house in Ridgefield, Connecticut, in the summer of 1949, she moved out with them as their boarder, all the while continuing to work on Wise Blood. In December 1950, on her way home to Milledgeville for Christmas, she became seriously ill on the train and was hospitalized on her arrival in Atlanta. She was diagnosed as having lupus, the same illness that had killed her father nine years earlier. Although a softening of the bone in her hip caused her to have to use crutches, O'Connor frequently accepted invitations to speak at colleges and Writers' Conferences in the latter half of the 1950s and early 1960s.

Early in 1964, while she was at work on an untitled third novel (a collection of stories, A Good Man Is Hard to Find, appeared in 1955; a second novel, The Violent
Bear It Away, in 1960), Flannery O'Connor had to have an abdominal tumour removed. It proved benign, but the lupus became reactivated and her kidneys were affected. O'Connor knew she was dying and she told her friend and biographer, Sally Fitzgerald, that one fear alone persisted that her mother would die before she did. She died early on 3 August 1964.

Some of her letters have been published since her death, and they show her to have been an eloquent if often whimsical correspondent. A fair share of honours and awards came Flannery O'Connor's way during her lifetime. She received a Kenyon Review Fellowship in Fiction in 1953, a grant from the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1957, and a grant from the Ford Foundation in 1959. Her stories won the O. Henry Memorial Award in 1957, 1963, and 1964. In 1962 she received an honorary Litt.D. from St. Mary's College, Notre Dame, and in 1963 a similar degree from Smith. She also received the National Catholic Book award in 1966 and the National Book Award in 1972 for her book *The Complete Short Stories*. A collection of her letters, edited by Sally Fitzgerald and entitled "The Habit of Being" was published in 1979.

O'Connor's body of work is small, consisting of only thirty-one stories, two novels, and some speeches and letters. Along with authors like Carson McCullers and Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor belongs to the Southern Gothic tradition that focuses on the decaying South and its damned people. A complex system of symbolism and allegory adds further resonance to O'Connor's writing. O'Connor was reared as a Catholic, went to Catholic schools, and remained a devout Catholic throughout her thirty-nine years. But she remarked, "Anything that comes out of the South is going to
be considered grotesque by the Northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be considered realistic.” Aware that not all readers shared her faith, she chose to depict salvation through shocking, often violent action upon characters that are spiritually or physically grotesque.

Moreover, her penchant for employing ironic detachment and mordant humour prompted some critics to classify O'Connor as an existentialist or nihilist. She also infused her fiction with the local colour and rich comic details of her Southern milieu, particularly through her skilful presentation of regional dialect. In an early television interview, O'Connor said that Northerners might appreciate her fiction more readily than Southerners since they would be less distracted by its “accident” and would not confuse it with “reality.” She continually met with resistance from readers expecting the assurances of verisimilitude. Only through poetic metaphor was she able to shatter the mirror held up to external nature and declared that fiction is neither true nor false. If she wanted to make fun of religion, a number of critics feel she would write about her own religion and make fun of it.

II

Flannery O'Connor’s first novel, *Wise Blood* (1952), is a tragicomic account of the making of an anchorite in our unlikely time. The young protagonist, Hazel Motes, called Haze, loses his faith while in the army and becomes an apostle of negativism. He goes from his native Eastrod, Tennessee, to a city called Taulkinham that is obviously Atlanta, to preach the church of truth without Jesus Christ Crucified. He wears a preacher’s bright blue suit and a preacher’s fierce black hat, but the only sign he gives
of his power is a mysterious "Take your hand off me" (24), to a policeman and a truck driver. As a result of Haze's refusal to go along with a religion-faker who calls himself Onnie Jay Holy, a man is hired to dress up as Haze and replace him, and Haze eventually murders the False Prophet, his Doppelganger, by running over him with his Essex. When a policeman gets the Essex off the road by the simple expedient of pushing it over an embankment, Haze is left with no place to go but an inner Calvary of blindness, asceticism, and sacrificial death at the hands of the police.

Another sort of antagonist is a boy named Enoch Emery, who works as a guard at the city park, and has his own religious mystery. He goes to the museum and pays his devotions to a mummy and steals the mummy, which he thinks of as the new Jesus, and presents it to Haze, who smashes it. Eventually he finds his religious fulfilment dressed in a stolen gorilla costume, but it is as the apostle of the mummified new Jesus that he functions in Haze's pilgrim's progress. There is still another false prophet, a fake blind man named Asa Hawks who pretends to have blinded himself with lime to justify his belief in Redemption. What he gets instead is Hawks's homely little fifteen-year-old daughter, Sabbath Lily, who moves into Haze's bed, becomes the Madonna of the new Jesus, and eventually turns into a monster of sexual voracity and heartlessness.

Following the publication of Wise Blood, O'Connor returned to writing short fiction. The stories written between 1952 and 1955, collected in A Good Man Is Hard to Find, make it obvious that she had come into her own as a short story writer. The collection sold surprisingly well. The following year, the English publisher, Neville Spearman, bought the rights for the collection. When it was published two years later,
the name had been changed to *The Artificial Nigger and Other Tales*. When O'Connor saw the edition, she was outraged, for without permission the English publisher had made the title changed and "featured a big black African, apparently in agony, granite agony" on the cover.

"A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is the title story of O'Connor's first short story collection, and, therefore, often serves as an introduction to the rest of her fiction. The story is enjoyable for its humorous portrayal of a family embarking on a vacation; O'Connor is unforgiving in her portrayal of these characters – they are not likable. However, in creating characters that elicit little sympathy from readers, O'Connor carefully sets the premise for her main argument: that grace is for everyone, even those who seem loathsome.

Though the story begins innocently enough, O'Connor introduces the character of The Misfit, an escaped murderer who kills the entire family at the end of the story. Through this character, O'Connor explores the Christian concept of "grace" – that a divine pardon from God is available simply for the asking. In the story, it is the grandmother – a petty, cantankerous, and overbearing individual – who attains grace at the moment of her death, when she reaches out to The Misfit and recognizes him as one of her own children. For O'Connor, God's grace is a force outside the character, something undeserved, an insight or moment of epiphany. Often, however, O'Connor characters miss moments of opportunity to make some connection; their spiritual blindness keeps them from seeing truth.
"The River" represents a child's point of view about the world. Harry Ashfield, a little boy, has parents who do not seem to care for him. They give parties, enjoy getting him out of the way, and spend very little time with him. Mrs. Connin, Harry's sitter for a day, does care. She takes Harry to her house where she feeds him, to the river where a preacher named Bevel baptizes him, and back to his apartment where he faces the aftermath of his parents' party. At the river he is baptized and hears Bevel's words about a river of life and the Kingdom of Christ, words he does not comprehend. Contrasted with the scene at the river is the return to his parents' apartment: bottles, full ashtrays, clutter. Harry awakens before his parents, who suffer from hangovers, and returns alone to the river. Mr. Paradise, a nonbeliever who had heckled Bevel the day before, is unable to save him although he tries.

"The Life You Save May Be Your Own" is a good example of the tendency of O'Connor's real portraits to overpower her allegorical ones. Mrs. Crater, an old woman, and her daughter, Lucynell, sit quietly on their porch at sunset when Mr. Shiftlet comes walking up the road to their farm. Mrs. Crater offers him shelter in exchange for work. Mr. Shiftlet says he has no interest in money, adding that he believes that most people are too concerned with money. Mrs. Crater is clearly offering her daughter's hand to Mr. Shiftlet. For the moment, however, Mr. Shiftlet simply decides to stay on the farm and to sleep in the broken-down car. Once Mr. Shiftlet moves into the Crater's farm, he fixes a broken fence and hog pen, teaches Lucynell how to speak her first word "bird" (a recurring symbol in O'Connor's fiction), and, most importantly, repairs the automobile.
Mrs. Crater, in her desperation to marry off her daughter, offers him a sum of money to marry Lucynell. He then accepts and agrees to marry her. Soon after, the three take the car into town and Lucynell and Mr. Shiftlet are married. After the wedding Mr. Shiftlet and Lucynell go on their honeymoon. They stop in a restaurant and have dinner. There Lucynell falls asleep. Once she is sound asleep on the counter of the diner, Mr. Shiftlet gets up out of his seat and begins to leave. The boy behind the counter looks at the girl and then back at Mr. Shiftlet in a confused manner. Afterwards Mr. Shiftlet is more depressed than ever and he keeps his eye out for a hitchhiker. As a storm is breaking in the sky, Mr. Shiftlet sees a road sign that reads, “Drive Carefully. The life you save may be your own.” Mr. Shiftlet then offers a ride to a boy who did not even have his thumb out.

“A Stroke of Good Fortune” is about a death-haunted quester alienated from self, family, and any form of community. In the short story, Ruby, a married woman of thirty-four, enters her apartment building with a heavy sack of groceries, and stares up the steep, dark stairway leading to her and Bill Hill’s apartment. She muses about her brother, Rufus, who is soon to return from the “European Theater” to live with her, because their former hometown, Pitman, does not exist anymore. She begins the climb up the dark staircase, growing more and more breathless with every step. She thinks about her recent visit to the psychic, Madame Zoleeda, who told her she was sick but that the outcome would bring good fortune in the end. Ruby again reinforces her conviction she will never go to a doctor, no matter what, and she continues climbing. Memories of her deceased mother fill her mind. The price her mother paid for having
had eight children, with only four surviving. Ruby trusts Madame Zoleeda – the palmist, who, like everyone else, can see that Ruby is pregnant. Of course, Ruby trusts Madame's predictions because she sees them her way: she will move to a subdivision. By the end of the story, it is clear that Ruby will not see her pregnancy as Good Fortune, but only as a stroke of bad luck.

"A Temple of the Holy Ghost" develops the relation of spiritual to physical life. It is told from the perspective of a 12-year-old girl and involves a visit by a pair of her 14-year-old cousins, Roman Catholic convent school girls. The cousins were recently lectured by the nuns about preserving their bodies as "temples of the holy ghost," a reference to the Bible passage from 1 Corinthians 6:19-20. The young girl's mother arranges for a pair of neighbourhood boys who are training to be preachers to accompany the cousins to a fair. While picking up the girls, the boys are mildly ridiculed for their simple, fundamentalist religious views. At the fair, the girls see a hermaphrodite displayed as a freak, which they later describe to their younger cousin. The hermaphrodite explained that this was how God made her. The end of the story reflects upon the acceptance of God's will as in the case of the hermaphrodite.

"The Artificial Nigger" describes a hard lesson in humility for the protagonist. Mr. Head and his ten-year-old grandson, Nelson, live in a small rural town in Georgia, and Nelson is visiting Atlanta for the first time since his birth. Nelson is sure he will enjoy the city, but his grandfather tells him that he is naive, and pokes fun at Nelson during their train ride because he has never seen an African American. After seeing some impressive buildings, Mr. Head takes Nelson to see the less-impressive side of
the city, including the sewer system which reminds Nelson of hell and then Mr. Head walks Nelson through the predominantly African-American section of town where they get lost. Not wanting to ask anyone there for directions, Mr. Head finally acquiesces to Nelson’s requests and allows the boy to ask an African-American woman for directions.

The situation is embarrassing for Nelson and the grandfather. They remain lost, and Nelson runs into an older white woman, knocking her down. When the crowd demands to know who is responsible for the boy, Mr. Head denies knowing him. Nelson feels betrayed and loses respect for the grandfather. Eventually, a stranger points them to the train station and along the way they pass by an African-American figurine from which the story gets its title. Mr. Head explains that it is there because the people in that neighborhood do not have real ones so they need artificial ones. Mr. Head feels like he has redeemed their relationship at this point in the story and Nelson has no intention to return to the city.

"A Circle in the Fire" is a richly entertaining story that as a simple tale is perfectly plausible and lifelike but which is vibrant from first to last with meaning. The short story involves Mrs. Cope, the owner of a farm in the South, who is visited by three teenage boys, including Powell Boyd, the son of one of her former farm workers. Mrs. Cope, her workers, and her daughter are all suspicious of the boys. The boys hitchhiked from Atlanta and are hoping to spend some time on the farm and ride her horses during their vacation. Mrs. Cope gives them some food, but discourages them from staying. The boys do not listen to her, riding her horses and lying to her.
threatens to get the sheriff and tells them she owns the farm and adjacent woods and
that they must leave. The story ends with the boys laughing prophetically while setting
fire to the woods, and the scene is reminiscent of a story in the Biblical Book of Daniel
where the evil King Nebuchadnezzar unsuccessfully attempts to burn three men in fiery
furnace when they refuse to worship the King’s idol.

The next short story, “A Late Encounter with the Enemy,” is loosely based
upon a newspaper article about a Civil War veteran attending his wife’s graduation that
Flannery O’Conner read in the early 1950s. General George Poker Sash is a one-
hundred-and-four-year-old Civil War veteran who remembers very little about the War
but is currently celebrated for his longevity. He has been invited to various public
celebrations where he covets the attention, particularly, from beautiful women in the
crowd, and he has an inflated image of himself despite his decrepit shape. The
General’s 62-year-old granddaughter, Sally Poker, prays every night that the general
lives long enough to sit on the stage during her college graduation so that everyone can
see her strong heritage and superiority. The general is wheeled onto the stage by Sally’s
young nephew, John Wesley, and is barely aware of the scene. Just as his
granddaughter is graduating the general experiences a revelation that he must look
beyond the past, and then he dies on-stage as his granddaughter is graduating although
this is not immediately evident. It is unclear if Sally gets beyond his prideful idolatry
about her heritage.

“Good Country People” targets mechanical responses to life, mindless
conformity, and rebellion. Mrs. Hopewell owns a farm in rural Georgia which she runs
with the assistance of her tenants, Mr. and Mrs. Freeman. Mrs. Hopewell's daughter, Joy, is thirty years old and lost her leg in a childhood accident. Joy is an atheist and has a PhD in philosophy but seems non-sensible to her mother, and in an act of rebellion against her mother, Joy changed her name to "Hulga," the ugliest name Mrs. Hopewell can imagine. A Bible salesman, purportedly named Manley Pointer, visits the family and is invited for dinner despite the Hopewells' lack of interest in purchasing Bibles. Mrs. Hopewell believes Manly is "good country people." While leaving the home, Pointer invites Joy for a picnic date the next evening, and she ironically imagines seducing the innocent Bible salesman. During the date, he persuades her to go up into the barn loft where he produces a hollowed-out Bible containing a bottle of whiskey and some condoms. He then persuades her to remove her prosthetic leg and her glasses. He tries to get her to drink some liquor, but she rebuffs his advances. At that point he disappears with her leg after telling her that he collects prostheses from disabled people and is an atheist.

The last short story, "The Displaced Person," presents characters who are obsessed with their private visions of God and the devil and who experience bewilderment and terror in their single-minded pursuit of this vision. The Guizacs, a family fleeing Poland sometime during or just after World War II, arrive at the farm of Mrs. McIntyre, a widow. Also living on the farm are her employees, a white family by the name of Shortley, a young black man named Sulk, and an older black man called Astor. Father Flynn, a Catholic priest, accompanies the Guizacs to the farm. Mr. Guizac proves to be a talented and hardworking man and Mrs. McIntyre is pleased with
him. The other workers, especially Mrs. Shortley, fear that Mr. Guizac will render them useless and they will lose their jobs. Later, she overhears Mrs. McIntyre planning to fire her. Mrs. Shortley and her family pack their belongings and leave the farm. Mrs. McIntyre learns that Sulk is engaged to be married to Mr. Guizac’s sixteen-year-old cousin, who is trapped in a Polish detention camp. Mrs. McIntyre is furious and unleashes her anger on Mr. Guizac, explaining that his white cousin cannot marry her black employee. She tells him she will fire him if he takes it any further. He tries to explain that the marriage might be the girl’s only chance to live, but she does not care. After this Mrs. McIntyre cannot shake her dislike for Mr. Guizac. Mrs. McIntyre tries to get Father Flynn's permission to fire Mr. Guizac, and the priest starts avoiding her in order to avoid the subject. Mr. Shortley tells Mrs. McIntyre that Mrs. Shortley has died of a stroke. Mrs. McIntyre goes to fire Mr. Guizac one Saturday morning. He is working beneath a tractor, with his legs sticking out. Sulk is nearby. Mr. Shortley parks the larger tractor on a hill. The break slips. The tractor starts to roll. Nobody warns Mr. Guizac and the tractor snaps his spine, killing him. Sulk and Mr. Shortley leave the farm. Mrs. McIntyre has a nervous collapse and then steadily declines until she is blind, speechless, and bedridden. Visitors are rare, but the priest comes over once a week and talks to her about the Catholic religion.

In *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, O'Connor grew more concrete and more preoccupied with the physical cruelty of disease and with the more profound cruelty that exists between parents and children. For Flannery O'Connor, psychic savagery is embedded in the blood, not only metaphorically in the kinship of mother
and child, but also in the living juice itself. The title story, "Everything That Rises Must Converge," seems to suggest a weakness in people who cling to the past blindly, without attempting to adapt to the present and to look toward the future. The protagonist Julian, the martyr, shows a loss of faith; but his mother has tremendous "faith" and comfort in knowing who she is, an ironic statement in the light of their somewhat impoverished situation. While waiting on the bus which will take her to her free weight-reducing class, Julian has an evil urge to break her spirit, an urge which proves to be a reality. Julian's mother utters the typical segregationist statements which embarrass Julian, but what Julian resents most in his mother is her not knowing who she is. His self-analysis of his being free from his mother is of course not true. After the push-and-pull between Julian and his mother, a big black woman with her four-year-old son boards the bus. She is wearing a hat identical to the one Julian's mother is wearing. Besides prompting internal reaction of Julian's mother to the black woman, the incident motivates the action that follows. Coincidentally, they get off at the same stop, and when Julian's mother tries to give the little boy a penny, the child's mother hits Julian's mother with her purse and stuns her. Julian tries to reinforce the "lesson" by explaining that the old world to which his mother clings is gone. The blow does damage, though, and Julian's mother passes out looking at him first and finding nothing.

The second short story is "Greenleaf." What at first seems a simple contest of wills between a male farm hand and a female farm manager takes on a complex of allusions relating to primitive ritual and to life-death/male-female iconography found in
myth. “Greenleaf” and “May” ironically suggest regeneration. “Green” is the colour of the resurrection; spring is the season of regeneration. And yet Greenleaf’s character is paradoxical; he murders Mrs. May.

Mrs. May owns a farm on which she hires Mr. Greenleaf to work because her sons are not interested in farm work, and to her dismay both live at home and are unmarried. One is a businessman while the other, a scholar and teacher at a university. Both Mrs. May and Mrs. Greenleaf consider themselves Christians. Mrs. May however has a somewhat smug morality based upon outward success, while Mrs. Greenleaf secretly practices faith healing and recognizes herself as a sinner. When no one is nearby she prays that Jesus stab her in the heart, which implies that he must change her sinful heart. The Greenleafs’ two successful sons own a farm, and their bull escapes onto Mrs. May’s property. She orders Mr. Greenleaf to shoot his sons’ escaped bull, and she and Mr. Greenleaf drive off looking for it. Under the pretence of killing the bull, Mr. Greenleaf actually chases it into the woods where it can escape. Seeing this, Mrs. May honks the car horn and the bull comes out of the woods goring her in the heart just as Mr. Greenleaf reappears. At this point, it is clear that the bull symbolizes Christ.

“A View of the Woods” at its core presents an internecine clash of family loyalties configuring O’Connor’s larger socio-theistic concerns. The main characters of the story are seventy-nine-year-old Grandfather Fortune, a successful landowner, and his favorite granddaughter, Mary Fortune Pitts, who is said to resemble him and he believes that she shares his business acumen. The grandfather is at the very least
ambivalent toward his own daughter and dislikes his son-in-law, Pitts, but allows them to live in a piece of his property. When the grandfather sells parcels of his land for development, he knowingly irritates his son-in-law on every occasion. The grandfather is in return frustrated every time Pitts chastises Mary Fortune and tells her not to let him beat her.

Eventually, Fortune decides to sell a parcel of land where Pitts grazes his calves for a gas station, and, in doing so, would obstruct their view of the woods. Fortune sells the land to a serpent-like man named Tilman, despite Mary Fortune's attempts to dissuade him from doing so. After Mary Fortune continually irritates her grandfather, he attempts to punish her, but she attacks him and says that she is entirely a Pitts, not a Fortune. In response, the grandfather smashes her head against the rocks, killing her, and then presumably suffers a heart attack as he looks out at a bulldozer developing his land.

The next short story "The Enduring Chill" involves Asbury, a writer from New York who returns home to his mother's farm in the South after being diagnosed with a serious illness. He is out of money, unsuccessful, and believes he is dying. His mother finds a local doctor who draws some of Asbury's blood to examine. In bed Asbury thinks about various experiences, including one the prior year when he interacted with the African-American farmhands and, in a show of rebellion against his mother, smoked with them in the dairy barn. However, the hands refused to drink some of the milk as Asbury did. Asbury requests that his mother bring a priest to him against her wishes. She eventually complies but the priest is elderly, hard of hearing, and not the
intellectual that Asbury hoped for. Asbury then requests to see the African-American farmhands and gives them cigarettes. The farmhands lie to him and tell him he looks well. Asbury finds this interaction disappointing. Later, Asbury is informed that he has undulant fever, probably from drinking raw milk. The illness will not kill him but will continually recur and cause him pain. Asbury is disappointed that he will not die a tragic death. He must face “The Enduring Chill” of accepting life and living in a community of others who do not validate individual self-importance. This requires that he learn to admit the feminine side of his nature and become more like his mother by attending to others rather than being obsessed with self.

“The Comforts of Home” focuses on the domestic, and on domestic disruption. The main character of the short story is Thomas, a history writer who lives with his mother. His mother takes pity on Sarah Ham (who calls herself Star Drake), a young woman who has been arrested and jailed for passing bad cheques. Thomas’ mother hires an attorney to parole the girl and finds a boardinghouse for Sarah to live in. After Sarah gets kicked out of the boardinghouse for drunkenness, Thomas’ mother invites the girl to live with them in spite of her son’s objections. After various conflicts where Sarah is seemingly flirtatious toward Thomas, Thomas gets the sheriff to agree to remove Sarah once he notices that his handgun is missing from his room. Before the sheriff arrives, Thomas notices that the gun has been returned. He decides to plant the gun in Sarah’s purse in order to get her removed anyway, but while doing so, he shoots at Sarah and as this is happening Thomas’ mother jumps in front of Sarah and is killed. The police arrive and arrest Thomas.
The next short story is “The Lame shall Enter First,” in which a death-haunted parent seeks to remake a child into a mirror image of himself. Sheppard, the main character, is a liberal, atheistic rationalist who is unsympathetic to the grief of his young son, Norton, despite the death of Norton’s mother only a year before the story takes places. Sheppard believes helping other people improve their lives is the greatest virtue in life, and he is frustrated with his inability to help Norton’s grief and resulting foibles.

Eventually, Sheppard invites Rufus Johnson, a fourteen-year-old juvenile delinquent, to live with them against Norton’s wishes. Sheppard met Johnson while volunteering at a juvenile incarceration facility, and desperately wants to help Johnson turn his life around. Johnson holds Sheppard in contempt and strongly believes in good and evil, but believes that he himself is evil and resists all of the naive attempts by Sheppard to help him. Against Sheppard’s wishes, Johnson tells Norton that his mother is in heaven above the earth, and he will only see her again if he dies as a child before he is corrupted. The story ends with Johnson being taken away by the police for a burglary and with Sheppard then finding Norton hanged dead from an attic rafter above the telescope that Sheppard purchased to help Johnson expand his horizons.

In the next short story, “Revelation,” an ugly, young woman is the mechanism through which the truth is revealed to Mrs. Turpin, the central character. Ruby Turpin, a smug, Southern woman, enters and dominates, by her large size, a crowded waiting room at a doctor’s office. She is accompanied by her submissive husband Claude, who takes the last empty seat in the room. From this gathering in a physician’s waiting
room, we discover that Mrs. Turpin has a preferential hierarchy of people: the rich, home-and-land owners, just home-owners, white trash, and blacks. Basically, it is an economic hierarchy. Mrs. Turpin is, of course, thankful to be on the upper end. As she is rejoicing to herself that things (her station in life) are not different, the fat teenager named Mary (virgin) Grace (redemption) hit Mrs. Turpin with a book and attacks her. Then Mary Grace calls her an old wart hog. Stunned, Mrs. Turpin and Claud return home, and she confesses to her black workers what Mary Grace has called her. Afterwards she goes alone to the pig parlour where she defends herself to invisible guests like the comforters of Job. Next she questions God and has a vision that, in essence, “the first shall be last and the last, first.” Besides the hypocrisy that Mrs. Turpin displays in the waiting room, she reveals an overwhelming pride in her position within the community and in relation to God.

“Parker’s Back” presents the sense of struggle between the body, felt from our limited perspective as evil, and the spirit. It is the story of a non-religious man, Parker, who has been obsessed with tattooing his body since childhood when he saw a tattooed man. He tattoos nearly his entire body, except his back because he cannot see tattoos on his back. After a cold, awkward courtship, Parker marries a seemingly fundamentalist woman, Sarah Ruth, who acts very judgmental towards him despite his seeming unbelief. He frequently contemplates leaving her.

After negligently crashing and destroying a tractor at work which nearly kills him, Parker abruptly leaves the scene and is filled with a desire to tattoo an image of God on his back. He also believes that this will please his harshly religious wife. When
Parker gets a tattoo of God with piercing eyes, other people are convinced that Parker has had an awakening experience with divine grace. However, Sarah Ruth is not impressed and attacks and berates him for what she claims is idolatry.

The last short story, "Judgment Day," can be interpreted on different levels: the material or physical, the spiritual, the psychological, and the sociological. Tanner is an old white man from Georgia who has gone to live with his daughter in New York City after a doctor of mixed white and black ancestry purchases the land on which Tanner and his friend Coleman, an African American, had been squatting in Georgia. Out of pride, Tanner refuses to operate a distillery on the land for the doctor and instead chooses to move in with his daughter who thinks he should leave his shack in Georgia.

Tanner takes pride in his history of dealing with African Americans and remembers his first encounter with Colemen when he was going to threaten him with a penknife as he did most of the other African Americans who were working with him. Instead of doing this he handed Colemen a pair of hand-whittled eye glasses and they later developed a close friendship. When Tanner tries befriending his African American neighbour in New York and calls the native New Yorker neighbour preacher, Tanner's motivations are misinterpreted and the neighbour attacks Tanner causing him to have a debilitating stroke. While recovering, Tanner seeks assurance from his daughter that she will eventually bury him in Georgia and not in New York. She agrees but he overhears her saying that she will not do so. Although somewhat disabled, Tanner tries escaping back to Georgia but collapses in the stairwell, and his African American neighbour finds him and puts his arms and legs through the spokes under the
banister where Tanner dies. Tanner’s daughter initially buries him in New York but eventually reburies him in Georgia when she feels overwhelming guilt about not following his wishes.

The title story of *The Geranium: A Collection of Short Stories* is about relationships: human relationships on the broadest scale, familial relationships on a narrower scale, and spiritual relationships on an individual scale. It presents the theme of alienation and the fear of death. The story involves a father from Georgia who has gone to live with his daughter and son-in-law in New York City. They live in a tenement building in overcrowded, impoverished conditions which help create tension and unhappiness for Old Dudley. He wants to return to Georgia, but cannot and is reminded of “home” by a sickly geranium which the “neighbors” across the alley sun regularly each day. The “neighbor’s” good deed is quickly abated by the geranium owner’s mockingly hostile exchange with Old Dudley. No kind words, no peace, no quiet for Old Dudley as he inquires about the geranium’s whereabouts.

His moment of reconciliation past, Old Dudley has alienated the spiritual relationship as well. He cannot speak. He can only stare down six floors at the uprooted geranium and cry. For Old Dudley the cracked flowerpot and broken geranium symbolize his final loss of touch with his community, although two people tell him how to get along in the city: his daughter tells him to mind his own business, advice generally well meant; and the neighbour tells him that “it’s a swell place once you get use to it” – similar advice without explicit instruction.
The second short story, "The Barber," tackles the issue of racism through the main character, a white, liberal professor. Rayber, a college teacher, is the butt of this story. Joe, the barber, passes small talk with Rayber during the first of three visits which Rayber makes to the barbershop: weather, hunting, and finally politics. It is an election year: Darmon, a liberal, versus Hawkson, a southern Democrat. Joe, his friend Roy, and most of the other townspeople are for Hawk who is against niggers. Joe baits Rayber who takes the discussion seriously. The first visit, Rayber does not say the right words; the second, he has rehearsed how the previous conversation should have gone but is stumped when asked for some reasons why anyone should vote for Darmon; and the third visit, he returns fully prepared for an elaborate speech full of sound and fury, but signifying nothing. Through the chortling of the other patrons, especially Roy, Rayber is provoked to violence. He hits Joe and storms out not to return. The story is not overly subtle and contains, via Joe, some of the stereotypes of blacks in the South. Rayber has had trouble with his position in the community, not just the small southern town but also the larger community of intellectual ideas.

The next short story "Wildcat" is unique among O'Connor's writing because it is the only story form the black point of view, solely about blacks, and mostly in dialogue. The wildcat in this story serves as a symbol for mortality. Old Gabriel, a blind black, has the sense of smell for a rampaging wildcat (symbol of the angel of death) that he knows is coming for him – if not tonight, then the next. The contrast is between the boys (youth) who go out after the cat and Old Gabriel (age) who is willing to wait for it to come to him. His vision of the Lord waiting for him with golden
vestments suggests to the reader that the wildcat (death) will get him just as it got Hezuh when Gabe was a boy. His wish is to die as a man, instead of waiting with women for death to steal him away.

Another early story in which O'Connor experiments with subject matter and form, "The Crop," can be read with two different purposes in mind: to learn about the fictional character, Miss Willerton, and to infer what O'Connor is saying about writers in general. In the humdrum life of Miss Willerton, age forty-four, the only "excitement" she enjoys is escaping via her rather limited imagination (her search for topics about which to write suggests how limited). When she meets her fantasy face-to-face on the street (the couple she passes fits her description of her fictional sharecroppers), she does not recognize it. She is more interested in escaping life than in dealing with it, a tendency contrary to a "good" writer's interest according to O'Connor. Miss Willerton's absorption with her fantasy is marked by her entering the story and in her imagination of becoming Lot's wife. Familial relationships play a tangential role in that family members intrude on Willie's world with mundane demands: crumbing the table and going to the grocery store.

Originally entitled "The Capture," the short story "The Turkey" subtly shows an eleven-year-old's initiation into the world of good and evil. Ruller's thoughts dominate the story as he plays a game of cowboys with his imaginary friends. But Ruller is distracted by the sight of a wild turkey, which he chases. His motivation is to risk his parents' anger over a torn shirt for pride over his accomplishment: bringing home a turkey for the dinner table. Ironically, when the bird, wounded and therefore
not as difficult a prey as Ruller first believes, eludes capture, Ruller denies Grace. He thinks of his brother Hane, a juvenile delinquent, and takes pleasure in swearing and defying his parents and grandmother, although in reality he is angry because he has run into a tree and knocked the wind out of himself.

When his thoughts return to his condition, he spies the turkey, dead form loss of blood. Ruller believes that the turkey is a sign from God and repents. Again his pride manifests itself, and he takes the long way home, through town on Saturday afternoon, to allow all to see his capture. Moved by the experience, he asks God to send him a beggar so that he can give the beggar his only dime (sacrifice). Hetty Gilman, the town’s beggar, appears mysteriously from nowhere, and Ruller thrusts the dime in her hand and feels an uplifting Grace—a feeling he has never felt before. Then he encounters another evil force—the country boys—who betray him and steal his turkey. Now afraid that something awful is chasing him, Ruller runs home. His fear of evil, however, can be taken as a sign that his experience was “unusual” and that he has been initiated into the larger condition of man.

The last short story, “The Train,” is a powerfully successful portrait of a disturbed young man who appears as someone who is in desperate need of being saved from complete chaos. It is a complex story that opens with Hazel Wickers, boarding a Pullman sleeper railroad car. It describes a young man, Hazel Wickers, as he boards a train home and his interactions with other passengers and an African American employee who he believes to be the son of someone in his hometown. The man denies this. Haze is travelling to Taulkinham, but the story’s final destination is a night in the
train itself. Haze is a nineteen-year-old youth, alone and nervous and clumsy and haunted by the death of his mother. His thoughts are disturbed by the resemblance of a black porter to someone back home, by a chatty woman sitting near him on the train, and by the prospect of spending the night in the coffin-like sleeper berth.

_The Violent Bear It Away_, published in New York in 1960, is Flannery O'Connor's darkly humorous Gothic novel about a Southern boy's spiritual awakening. It charts the spiritual and physical journey of fourteen-year-old Francis Marion Tarwater, raised by his great-uncle in the backwoods of Alabama to be a prophet. Tarwater travels to the city, where he struggles against the need to deny his spiritual inheritance and the call of God. O'Connor paints a macabre picture of Southern life and religious fundamentalism and parodies the blind self-assurances of modern secular thinking. The novel is unsettling because it offers no easy truths; its hero is an unlikable boy who learns that doing God's work entails violence, unreason, even madness. It is not, as might be expected, a parody of religious fanaticism, but a psychological study of the mysterious, frightening, and sometimes offensive nature of the religious calling. Stark religious symbolism and Biblical allusions unite to explore themes of spiritual hunger, faith versus reason, and the battle for the soul.

The novel begins when old Mason Tarwater dies. Prior to his death, he had asked his great-nephew, the teen-aged protagonist, Francis Tarwater, to give him a proper Christian burial, with a cross marking the grave so that his body would be resurrected on Judgment Day. Young Tarwater starts to dig the grave but suddenly hears a "voice" in his head telling him to forget about the old man. Tarwater obeys
and gets drunk instead. When he returns from drinking, he sets the house, in which he and his uncle had lived, on fire, with his great-uncle’s body still inside. He leaves for the city and gets a ride from a salesman, who drops him off at his uncle Rayber’s door. Tarwater is greeted at the door by Rayber’s young son Bishop, who has Down’s syndrome. Old Mason Tarwater (the great-uncle) had commissioned the young Tarwater to baptize Bishop at some point, in order to save the little boy’s soul.

Rayber devises a plan to take Tarwater back to the country where the damage had been done in the hope that confronting his past will allow him to leave it. Under the guise of taking the two boys out to the country to a lodge to go fishing, Rayber finally confronts Tarwater and tells him that he must change and must leave the crazy, superstitious Christian upbringing that his great-uncle corrupted him with. Tarwater, however, is not so easily convinced. While at the lodge, Tarwater meets up again with the “voice” (the devil) who tells Tarwater to forsake his great-uncle’s command to baptize little Bishop and instead, drown the boy. Tarwater ends up drowning Bishop while at the same time baptizing the boy, thereby fulfilling both destinies simultaneously. Rayber realizes what has happened and faints, not out of fear for his son’s life, but because he feels nothing at his son’s death.

Tarwater runs away into the woods in order to go back to his great-uncle’s house to confront his demons once and for all. He eventually hitches a ride with another man, who entices Tarwater to get drunk. Tarwater takes the man’s offer and passes out, eventually waking up naked against a tree, his clothes neatly folded beside him. Tarwater finally makes his way back to the old farm of his great-uncle, where the
house has been burned to the ground. The story ends with Tarwater heading toward the city to “WARN THE CHILDREN OF GOD OF THE TERRIBLE SPEED OF MERCY” (478).

O'Connor was very much influenced by West, especially as a graduate student at the University of Iowa. According to Paul Engle, Director of the University of Iowa Writer's Workshop, in an interview, by Suzanne Morrow Paulson, 1982:

"Flannery was the most sensible and self-aware student ever at Iowa. She had no illusions whatsoever about the complexity of life, and that's why she put so much complexity into her fiction. No writer is ever more aware of what she writes. She was a complicated person - a subtle person. Simple and unsubtle readers were not her proper readers."\(^{10}\)

O'Connor’s fiction concur with Nietzsche’s prediction that the best thing about Western civilization - its relentless quest for the truth - will finally bring with it the worst possible news: the extent of man’s corruption. O'Connor is thankful to skeptics like Camus, whose commitment to justice she takes as a refining fire for her own faith. The pain of feeling the contemporary situation at the ultimate level comes through in lines she writes to the novelist John Hawke’s: "It is hard to believe always but more so in the world we live in now. There are some of us who have to pay for our faith every step of the way and who have to work out dramatically what it will be like without it and if being without it would be ultimately possible or not."\(^{11}\) Her best friend, Betty Hester, received a weekly letter from O'Connor for more than a decade. These letters
provide the bulk of the correspondence collected in *The Habit of Being*, a selection of O'Connor's letters edited by Sally Fitzgerald. The reclusive Hester is given the pseudonym "A," and her identity was not known until after she killed herself in 1998. Much of O'Connor’s best-known writing on religion, writing, and the South is contained in these and other letters. The complete collection of the unedited letters between the two was unveiled by Emory University on 12 May, 2007.

O'Connor also has a deeply sardonic sense of humour, often based in the disparity between her characters' limited perceptions and the awesome fate that awaits them. O'Connor used such characters' inability to come to terms with race, poverty, and fundamentalism, other than in sentimental illusions, as an example of the failure of the secular world in the twentieth century. O'Connor explains in a letter to Andrew Lytle, 15 September 1955, her "place" this way: "To my way of thinking, the only thing that kept me from being a regional writer is being a Catholic and the only thing that kept me from being a Catholic writer (in the narrow sense) is being a Southerner..."

One such way is in the comic tradition. "Much of her work," writes Rubin, "appears rooted in the great comic tradition of Middle Georgia literature, which goes back to the old Southwestern humour of A.B. Longstreet and others in the early nineteenth century." O'Connor’s fiction is characterized by her vision and that vision drew heavily from her Catholic faith. Patricia Meyer Spacks suggests that "conceivably the relative invisibility of women writers reflects special critical difficulty in dealing with them." O'Connor’s heroes rarely want to feel compassion because they fear
human contact more than they fear emotional death. In the absence of emotion, action becomes the primary sign of life. O’Connor’s heroes can never connect with themselves or with others. They come closest in momentary acts of violence in which they murder or commit suicide.

According to fellow reviewer Joe Zuber, the wide range of books O’Connor chooses to review demonstrates that she is profoundly intellectual. Her reviews consistently confront theological and ethical themes in books written by the most serious and demanding theologians of her time. To this extent, O’Connor is a realist. However, we must hasten to add that in the final analysis Flannery O’Connor takes us far away from the familiar world. In fact, to read O’Connor as a realistic writer, to see her primarily in the tradition, for example, of the regional humourists, is to limit severely the author’s scope and, indeed, to invite difficulty and misunderstanding. Furthermore, comparisons of O’Connor with Faulkner and Welty are useful – to a point. O’Connor’s stories are very subtle as they render racial conflicts in America, but they are not without sympathy for the suffering of blacks. Some critics still complain that O’Connor’s treatment of the Negro depends too much on negative stereotypes: Others charge her with racism. Josephine Hendin argues that in O’Connor’s work, “Racial conflict was a spectacle.”

As Kahane notes about O’Connor’s work: “violent confrontations arouse dread and anxiety even under the surveillance of wit,” because her “imagery... evokes archaic fears ... infantile fears – of devouring, of penetration, of castration” – of what Freud sees as the substance of the uncanny. This element of sympathy that the reader
feels has deep roots and has resulted in the successful enactment of O'Connor's religious impulse, requiring a humble awareness of our connectedness to the human community unifies by suffering.

III

In selecting a writer for study, one must be guided by certain norms. The fictional terrain has to be a fusion of the claims of relevance and the claims of art. Flannery O'Connor structured her imaginative insights in such a way that they serve as both mirror and lamp. The images of society that are reflected in her fiction are complex and unified. But it does not mean that we read her fiction to forge a sociology of her fiction; we read them in order to appropriate the way in which they successfully function as lamps, that is, for the light they throw on the English socio-cultural problematic. Further, as Joan Rockwell rightly observes:

... fiction is not only a representation of social reality, but also a necessary functional part of social control, and also paradoxically an important element of social change. It plays a large part in the sociolisation of infants, in the expression of official norms such as law and religion, in the conduct of politics, and in general gives symbols and modes of life to the population, particularly in those less easily defined but basic areas such as norms, values, and personal and inter-personal behaviour. The implications of this are that fiction can give us two types of information about society: firsts, in a descriptive way, facts about the state of technology, laws, customs, social structure and institutions. Second, more subtle and less easily
obtained information about values and attitudes. These last become most visible when they are brought to the surface as the themes of literature in nodal periods when great changes are taking place in the basic institutions of society. Changes, for instance, in the structure and formation of the family or of economic life – changes which produce a conflict of values which finds its expression in literature.¹⁹

If one close reads Flannery O'Connor's fiction, one can gather information about values and attitudes in these times when great changes are taking place in the basic institutions of society. The focus of the thesis, therefore, is on the conflict of values as expressed in her fiction. Robert Nisbet, in his Sociology as an Art Form, says, "At the center of any given style lies what can only be called a theme, or a cluster of themes. Theme carries with it a more active, positive, and dynamic character than does the word style. Implicit in any theme is at once a question being answered, more or less, and also an ordering of experience and observation in a special focus."²⁰ The thesis attempts a critical consideration of Flannery O'Connor's fiction from the point of view of theme as a method of the "ordering of experience and observation in a special focus."
REFERENCES


8. Harvey Breit – O'Connor Television Interview (NBC “Galey-proof,” May 1955); Print in the O'Connor Collection at Georgia College.


12. “A” is a writer friend and correspondent who chose to remain anonymous.


