CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION
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Though Flannery O'Connor is regarded as a southern writer, her fictional concerns place her in the mainstream of American literature. As Josephine Hendin observes in The World of Flannery O'Connor,¹ O'Connor's distinction becomes clear when she is compared with such writers as William Styron, Truman Capote, and William Faulkner. While Faulkner and Styron write about man mythologizing himself and give the least of his acts the greatest magnitude, as for example Isaac Snopes in Faulkner's The Hamlet, O'Connor writes about a world without myths. A writer's sense of his homeland, a quality whereby the traditional Southern literary artist offers an interpenetration of the past and the present, is somewhat absent in Flannery O'Connor's fiction. The point could be illustrated by a critical examination of the sense of alienation experienced by the Misfits in the novels of Faulkner or Styron or Truman Capote. Percy Grimm's murder of Joe Christmas in Light in August and Nat Turner's murder of Margaret in The Confessions of Nat Turner would illustrate the point that Faulkner and Styron tell us more about how a man makes symbols than how he kills or dies. For Christmas and Turner, murder
is a repudiation of slavery. It is a release from the burden of the South's peculiar institution of Negro ancestry. These characters have a sense of race as a force of destiny. Their view of fate is such that it unfolds the blood of man powerfully, and he is "expressed" in death. In contrast, O'Connor's murders are murders without mythology. The fate of the Misfit, Motes and Smith is such that they are in the first place estranged from themselves. They are out of touch with their own feelings to the extent that they know or infer themselves from their own actions or from external signs. The Misfit speaks most honestly with his gun. The most potent part of Motes's personality is his car. They come closest to connecting with objects which fulfil their fantasies of destruction. When the Misfit makes a polite speech at the time of shooting his grandmother, he allows silence to engulf the atmosphere. It is "in this silence that Flannery O'Connor becomes most eloquent. Like a painter with a genius for using negative space, O'Connor says most about human feelings when she says nothing. In both her murder scenes it is what is left out that says most." Flannery O'Connor's remarkable art reveals her ability to project a fantasy of revolt. In committing herself to such characters as the Misfit, O'Connor makes poetry out of the surface of reality.
According to Flannery O'Connor, modern fiction explores "the mystery of personality" which she conceives as "the general mystery of incompleteness." Though she spoke about the inadequacy of Freud's psychology as expressed in the view that religion is wish fulfilment and that psychic determinism guides man's conduct, she refrained from too much of generalisation in Freudian terms. One of the characteristics of Flannery O'Connor's art is that there is an awareness of the importance of existentialism in her art. The acceptance of despair and an awareness of human mortality are a means of overcoming alienation and psychic fragmentation, as Flannery O'Connor sees it. The stories that most suggest these kinds of concerns focus on a single character. These characters are described as "death-haunted guests alienated from self, family, and any form of community." For example, Ruby Hill in "A Stroke of Good Fortune" denies her own pregnancy because she fears that her mother's fate would befall her. Because her mother died in childbirth, she associates pregnancy with mortality. Her fear of death leads to a profound sense of alienation where she alienates herself from her husband, her own body, and the whole human community. She is described in terms
of the image of the funeral urn in the short story in order to signify the haunting sense of personal death and also to prefigure her own death. The short story "A Stroke of Good Fortune" reminds us of Freud's lecture on "Archaic and Infantile Features in Dreams" where he discusses the death wishes of parents for their children. The theme of alienation and fear of death is well illustrated in stories such as "Wild Cat," and "The Geranium." In "Wild Cat," the blind old Negro Gabriel is another character who is obsessed with mortality and is afraid that he will follow the fate of 'Ole Hezah." The Wild Cat in the story serves as a symbol of mortality. Dudley's attempts in "The Geranium" to overcome mortality by establishing his significance apart from others is indicative of his alienation. The precariously positioned geranium hints at Dudley's own situation of being a dangling man as it were symbolising human predicament.

Between "The Geranium" and "Judgement Day" which is an advance over "The Geranium" tale, a development in Flannery O'Connor's art is noticed. If in her earliest stories alienation, despair, and loss of identity have engaged the reader's attention, "Judgement Day" reveals O'Connor's tendency to move away from
depicting the despair of individuals to depicting social contexts and focusing on interactions often referring to race or class lines. In "Judgement Day" there is a rigorous satirising of the racist whereas in "The Geranium" there is merely an exploration of the alienated quester struggling in a meaningless world.

O'Connor read Carl Jung and Erich Neumann, psycho-analytic theorists, who spoke about the human psyche as being divided between masculine and feminine impulses, the animus and the anima. These theorists saw a threat to human psyche in the modern world because of the dominance of masculine impulses. Short stories like "The Comforts of Home," "The Enduring Chill," "Greenleaf," "The Displaced Person" illustrate this theme. Thomas in "The Comforts of Home" and Asbury in "The Enduring Chill" feel rage towards their mothers who attempt to thwart their sense of power and control. There is a suggestion in this story to counter the masculinization of culture. Some of these themes, as Frederick Asals notices, connect O'Connor with Catholic concerns, for the relevance of the Biblical idea expressed in Galatians 3:38 that "there is neither male nor female: for Ye are all one in Christ Jesus," seems to be applicable to some of these stories.
Suzanne Paulson indicates, O'Connor's interest in Jung and Neumann relates to her interest in the evolutionary view that human evolution is measured by the degree to which a particular society overcomes revolution for others as a result of egoism. It is here that Flannery O'Connor's Southern identity is clearly in evidence in her narrative art because the South has always been sensitive to male/female dichotomies. The Southern belle is regarded as a model of feminine purity and the Southern Confederate soldier as a model of masculine potency even in the face of defeat. Several O'Connor's stories are distinguished by male protagonists who are antagonistic towards family and express an aversion for femininity. They attempt to repress all reminders of their own physicality. In stories like "Greenleaf" and "The Enduring Chill" male characters exhibit aggressive behaviour, explicitly based on male prerogative. While Asbury Fox represents aggressive masculinity, isolation, and cold rationality, his mother represents conventional attitudes of the community, tenderness and quality as of the feminine caretaker. Asbury, like Hazel, Sheppard Hulga, and old Dudley, is a modern intellectual struggling for significance and permanence in a world of transience and fragmentation. These characters suffer existential encounters
with nothingness. Driven by Narcissistic self-interest and by an inflated idea of his own literary gifts, Asbury reveals, even in his unwritten play, his urge to validate his superiority and to differentiate himself from his community. In the end he faces "the enduring chill" of accepting life and living in a community which does not place any premium on individual self-importance. That is, he admits the feminine side of his nature and becomes more like his mother by attending to others than by being obsessed with the self. Self-sacrifice rather than self-assertion, a capacity for tenderness rather than aggression are projected as necessary in some of these stories including "Greenleaf" where the dominance of masculine values is portrayed as preventing wholeness of self and harmony within the family.

Alienation in a broader sense, as it derives from interactions not only between self and family but between self and society, is a theme suggested in some of O'Connor's stories like "Good Country People," "Revelation," "The Displaced Person" and so on. Establishing the right relationship with the community is a major theme in the stories where it is pointed out egosynthesis requires both ethos (group identity) and
ego because the larger social order contributes to and dissipates our sense of self. In the "Patridge Festival" the young rebel Calhoun who denies his resemblance to his progenitor because he wishes to establish his own unique identity dehumanises the members of the village community into abstractions. This denial of community on the part of Calhoun is depicted from the start. His attitude promotes racism, classicism, and certain other types of hierarchical thinking.

Racial conflict in a major theme in the O'Connor canon. Lawrence Ruble and other psychologists explain that attitudes towards the body profoundly affect human responses to dark skin. In O'Connor's short stories racial prejudice is associated with aversion towards dirt, the excremental organs, and death. In "Judgement Day" Tanner associates a black woman with dung. Tanner, for example, cannot relate himself to the blacks except as inferiors. His daughter treats them as things. Tanner condescendingly calls his black neighbour John. He thus refused him his true identity. When he calls a black a "preacher" it is evident that he is taking a sexist view according to which the position of a preacher is one of the more feminine and passive occupations available to a negro. An important metaphor in
this short story is the pair of glasses which Tanner gives Coleman. The pair of glasses introduces into the narrative the motif of blindness. Tanner is unable to see that we suffer a common lot. And further, in his aggressive assertions, he makes Coleman see the world his way and see differences rather than similarities between them. The pair of glasses in a sense emphasises not the difference but the similarity and it suggest that Tanner's assumption of the role of a superior white reveals an inner inadequacy which prevents his developing his sense of integrity.

One of the characteristics of O'Connor's writing is that there is concentration upon violence, suffering, and disorder, that is, upon those concepts that are integral parts of a grotesque vision. Her dark view of human will develops from her Catholicism which supports the notion that man is incapable of virtuous action in a world that by its nature promotes evil. In her letters in which she chastises pious, elitist attitudes towards sin, she makes the point that we should not disown what comes in human form nor accept with sentimentality what offends our humanity. Gilbert Muller describes Flannery O'Connor as "an artist of the Catholic grotesque," who "acknowledges possibilities
of meaning which transcend the ordinary configurations of the secular grotesque." Depicting the worst aspects of human nature is for O'Connor an act of faith, an act of shocking us into "grace." Her art asserts that we should look at the worst and accept it, and "it is when the individual's faith is weak, not when it is strong, that he will be afraid of an honest fictional representation of life." Though regarded by some as a writer obsessed with depicting Southern grotesques, Flannery O'Connor's involvement with modernist thought, her mode of extending sympathy, her method of indirection, her way of crossing racial and class barriers not for the sake of her destructive characters, but for the sake of those grotesques who still manage a gesture of love in spite of their other failings - all indicate that she is an acknowledged master of short fiction. Her insights into modern life and "the mystery of personality," have indeed earned for her work intense critical response.
REFERENCES:


