CHAPTER I

THE NARRATIVE ART OF FLANNERY O'CONNOR
Flannery O'Connor was no doubt a southern writer but the peculiar obsessions which sprang from the unique circumstances of her life made her different from being a southerner. The concerns of her work carve for her a place in the centre of the American consciousness and bring her fiction into the main stream of American literature. Flannery O'Connor is a writer who would use the trappings of southern life but make them reach directions which are recognisably distinctive, when compared to such southern contemporaries as William Faulkner, William Styron, and Truman Capote. The habitues of southern fiction, the one-horse farmer, the outlaw, the peddler, the workman, and the black appear in the work of all four writers. They display a typical distrust of intellect and abstraction, a typical characteristic of the southern writer. They all show a world sprinkled with violence. Faulkner and Styron pursue sexual violence in characters such as Popeye and Temple Drake with such devotion that the very sordidness of the characters achieves a cosmic stature. William Styron's Nat Turner, like so many of the violent heroes of southern fiction, is a romantic mythologizing. In both Faulkner and Styron action
dissolves in lyricism. O'Connor and the mature Capote write about a world without myths. While Styron and Faulkner expand the dimensions of reality, O'Connor and Capote reduce or reflect them. While Faulkner and Styron expand the scale of human passion, O'Connor reduces it. Her heroes are neither human nor symbolic, nor heroic in any traditional sense. They are projections of her "fantasies of revolt." O'Connor makes fiction out of the emptiness of these heroes. She has committed herself creatively to characters who have neither soul nor depth in order to create an American tragedy of life incapable of tragic grandeur. For O'Connor, life is a mass of chaotic pictures. Revealing no inner life, her characters exist soullessly on the surface of reality. Even if her characters come alive in some violent act, their passion is muted and their violence does not spring from within. Flannery O'Connor thus celebrates in her fiction and her short stories the emotional death that frees her psychic freaks from the agony of human beings, human ties, and human longings. She lets her characters live on the surface of life without pleasure or remorse. In the words of Hendin, "O'Connor took from them memory, the inner life that would have engulfed them in guilt or fear."
O'Connor felt that the individual functions as a part of the larger religious community as well as the social community. These concerns of O'Connor are usually revealed through a single character. These characters are called death-haunted questers who are alienated from self, family, and any form of community. Ruby Hill in "A Stroke of Good Fortune" is subconsciously aware that she is pregnant. But she is afraid of the fate of her own mother who died in childbirth descending on her. Therefore she denies her pregnancy and prefers to think she has cancer. She associates pregnancy with mortality. The fear of death results in an inability to love. It therefore leads to a profound sense of alienation from the family as well as the community. Ruby Hill alienates herself from her own body because she does not want to participate in the generative process. She is divided rather than whole. As Flannery O'Connor describes it symbolically, her body is shaped nearly like a funeral urn, signifying the self-sacrifice that the parent is expected to indulge in for the sake of the child. O'Connor declares that this story is in a way Catholic because it presents "the rejection of life at the source," especially the rejection of the physical body. Ruby is threatened by her husband who
reminds her of her own physicality and sexuality. She imagines that his resistance to buying a house in Sobahs is an attempt to "kill her."^ She wonders if she should "kill herself" (C.S.96). She looks upon the opposite sex as a mortal threat. Her neighbour, Prof. Jerger tells her that the "fountain of youth" (C.S.100) is located in the heart. But Ruby's quest for life is doomed to fail because she ignores the heart, fails to love, and fears both death and life. O'Connor explains that the quest for immortality needs guidance. "Our salvation is worked out on earth according Christ in one another."^ In Ruby, we have a Freudian sketch of an infantile mind. She regresses to an infantile state because of the traumas experienced with the death of her mother and siblings.

Stories like "The Enduring Chill" and "Greenleaf" develop some of the ideas about male/female conflicts that were posited by the psycho-analytic theories. Jung defines the psyche as divided between masculine and feminine impulses. He asserted that an integrated mature self should achieve a balance between these impulses. Neumann outlined that the dominance of aggressive masculine values in the modern world threatened the civilised future of humanity. Femininity contributed
to tenderness in human relations. Several O'Connor stories are in fact distinguished by male protagonists who are antagonistic towards family and express an aversion to femininity. Not that the revulsion for a woman is a new idea. In O'Connor's stories dealing with this issue, male characters exhibit aggressive behaviour, sometimes based on male prerogative. In "Greenleaf," Mrs. May complains that Mr. Greenleaf takes advantage of her because she is a woman. Mrs. May's sons indulge in angry tirades against their mother. In "The Enduring Chill," Asbury verbally attacks his sister and mother. These stories share a special focus on symbolic context related to sex. Male potency is represented by images of twins, horns, bulls, walking stick, gun, and even artist. Various negative images of women are projected by aggressive males. In the "Comforts of Home" Thomas sees the delinquent girl as a "slut." In "The Enduring Chill" Asbury sees his sister as a "sleeping dog." Mrs. May in "Greenleaf" is presented as a kind of Medusa. The male characters in these stories, by feeling an aversion for female characters, suggest the need to counter the masculinisation of culture. These themes connect O'Connor with Catholic concerns and shows how one of the central concerns of O'Connor seems to be the explication of
the Biblical idea that both the male and the female are one in Jesus Christ (Galatians : 3:38). Only when sex-related differences are harmoniously integrated can spiritual development take place. Revulsion for femininity and the body self provides a measure of alienation from the community. It signifies a lack of evolutionary progress towards unity.

O'Connor's concern with the death-haunted questers and male/female conflicts indicates that there is an absence of a social or personal sense of history in her fiction. In Faulkner, Styron and Capote, the heroes are as alienated as O'Connor's. What is relevant is that both Faulkner and Styron have written fundamentally Christian books, using the themes of the Fall of Man and the fall of the south almost interchangeably. They write within a framework of traditional meaning, with a strong sense of the gradations of value in life. Faulkner and Styron built their countries out of the South's greatest literary virtue: "its ability to lag behind the rest of America in giving up the romantic sense of the hero and the history." But O'Connor and Capote have abandoned the South's most distinctive concerns. They write out of the main stream of the American consciousness. Flannery O'Connor uses the trapping of southern life. But the peculiar
characteristic of her writing and the universality of her art lie in the fact that she makes use of the elements of Southern life in such a way that they explode as it were in new and unexpected directions.

O'Connor exhibits in her short fiction an intolerant attitude towards the narrative discourse in the language of metonymy. Her own effort is to avoid dead metaphors and move in the direction of poetry. While displacing history and community as primary subjects for fiction and by disparaging social or economic or psychological forces, she chooses to elevate poetic metaphor beyond its usual place in customary prose. She begins a novel by presenting a character in an unstable situation and she could remove that instability through the intervention of an outside force. Close up to poetry in its condensation, the short story remained O'Connor's form of succinct creative expression.

Yet another important feature of O'Connor's fiction can be understood if we make a comparative study of the heroes of Light in August, The Confessions of Nat Turner, "A Good Man is Hard to Find," and Wise Blood. While Styron and Faulkner expand the dimensions of reality, O'Connor and Capote reduce or reflect them. A study of the preoccupations of these writers with
reference to their projections of murder will illustrate
the essential gulf between Flannery O'Connor and the
more traditional literary South. The South before and
during the Civil War emerges in echoes such as search
for the mansion in "A Good Man is Hard to Find." It
is also reflected in Julian's lament for the Godhigh
mansion in "Everything That Rises Must Converge."
The Anti-bellum southern past does not exist as a
standard of value, or even as an index of what has
been lost, as in the case of Tennessee Williams's
play, A Street car Named Desire. It exists as a fiction
for the aged and infantile. The image of man at the
last moment in his own life, or at the moment when he
ends the history of another is presented thus in the
fiction of Faulkner, Capote, Styron and so on. The
heroes of these writers are as alienated as O'Connor's.
For example, let us take into consideration Percy
Grimm's Murder of Joe Christmas in Light in August.
Grimm moved by an inexorable Player goes about with
his killing spree thus:

Grimm emptied the automatic's magazine
into the table; later someone covered all
five shots with a folded handkerchief ...
When the others reached the kitchen they
saw the table flung aside now and Grimm
stopping over the body. When they
approached to see what he was about, they saw that the man was not dead yet, and when they saw what Grimm was doing one of the men gave a choked cry and stumbled back into the wall and began to vomit. Then Grimm too sprang back, flinging behind him the bloody butcher knife. "Now you'll let white women alone even in hell," he said. He just lay there, with his eyes open and empty of everything save consciousness, and with something, a shadow, about his mouth. For a long moment he looked up at them with peaceful and unfathomable and unbearable eyes. Then his face, body, all seemed to collapse to fall in upon itself and from out the slashed garments about his hips, loins the pent black blood seemed to rush like a released breath. It seemed to rush out of his pale body like the sparks from a rising rocket; upon that black blast the man seemed to rise soaring into their memories forever and ever.

In the confessions of Nat Turner, Nat rises the sword that hangs in his right hand like the weight of all the earth to Kill Margaret. In *Wise Blood*, when Hazel Motes wreaks his vengeance on Solace Layfield, The Prophet began to run in earnest. He tore off his shirt and unbuckled his belt and ran out of the trousers.
He began grabbing for his feet as if he would take off his shoes too, but before he could get at them, the Essex knocked him flat and ran over him.  

In his conversation with grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" the Misfit becomes upset because he does not know whether Christ raised the dead. The grandmother says,

"Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own Children!." She reached out and touched him on the shoulder. The Misfit sprang back as if a snake had bitten him, shot her three times through the chest. Then he put his gun down on the ground and took off his glasses and began to clean them. Hiram and Bobby Lee returned from the woods and stood over the ditch, looking down at the grandmother who half sat and half lay in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a child's and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky.

Without his glasses, the Misfit's eyes were red-rimmed and pale and defenceless-looking. "Take her off and throw her where you thrown the others," he said, picking up the cat that was rubbing itself against his leg.

"She was a talker, wasn't she?" Bobby Lee said, sliding down the ditch with a yodel.
"She would of been a good woman," the Misfit said, "If it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life."

"Some fun!" Bobby Lee said. "Shut up, Bobby Lee," the Misfit said, "It's no real pleasure of life." (28-29)

Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, describes the murders of Mr. Clutter and his daughter, Nancy, with a cold-blooded clarity. The murders in Faulkner and Styron tell us about how a man makes symbols rather 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 most peculiar institution and the Negro ancestry that makes them its victims. They have a sense of race as a force of destiny. They have a sense of fate unfolding in the blood of a man in such a way that it can only be expressed in murder or escaped in death. Joe Christmas's "murder of Joanna Burden" frees him from a restrictive society. It enables him to lose himself in nature where he finds some redemption in a world beyond fury or despair. In contrast, the murders in O'Connor's and Capote's fiction are murders without creation, without mythology. They occur in a historical void. The murderer never transcends himself. He remains so enmeshed in his own body that he cannot realise that he is the creator of someone
else's last sensation. In *Wise Blood*, Motes wants to kill Solace Layfield because he is an unpleasant self image. When Layfield is dying, he finds that he does not really resemble him. So his murder resolves nothing and changes nothing. But in the case of Joe Christmas, the importance of his death lies not in its action, not in the details of the shooting or castration, but in its meaning. The action at the core of the episode is diminished so that its significance is highlighted. In the case of Christmas, whose black and white blood are at war, he is the embodiment of the chaos caused by the fall. The fall from Eden and the fall of the South merge as a general fall into confusion, disunity, and disorder. The tragedy of Joe Christmas as a man is that he is alien to both white and black society. He may be Christ-like because his fate is to suffer for the accumulated sins of men, and for the crimes of those who first bought slaves, and for the sin of his father, unknown but presumably black and Mexican. In his death he reaches atonement with black blood. Like Christmas, Styron's Nat Turner is an alien estranged from white society and black society as well. Barred from the first by his black skin and by his white learning, he bears the burden of both southern history
and his own ancestry. He sees the blood he will shed as a way of overcoming his servitude. It is a mode of redeeming himself as a man and of defining himself in a new way in white society. His violence is meant as a gesture of repudiation of the white south. It ends in the creation of a symbol. Both Light in August and The Confessions of Nat Turner were written by white southern Christians who associate the dignity of the negro with his suffering, with his acceptance of his fate, and with his compassion for his oppressor.

As Faulkner scrambles the sequence of time in Light in August, so Styron uses devices that let time evolve as significant action. Turner, a historical figure of the nineteenth century, describes a murder committed in a past before the book begins. He recalls acts filtered through his memory. His murder scene, preluded by how he wants the southern woman, resolves the conflict of desire and hatred, and answers the question whether a negro slave should feel pity for a turtle or a white southern woman. His desire is so mingled with yearning and love that it seems easier for him to kill her as a symbol of White Womanhood than to face the mixture of tenderness and hatred she arouses in him. His tenderness and compassion are only freed when she is dying. In The Confessions of Nat Turner, Nat circles Margaret's body, seals it off from
the rest of his life, letting it float like the image of the white marble temple that begins and ends the book in a fantasy sequence as it were. If Christmas dies because he is reminded of his birth and his connection to the white world, Turner dies because Margaret makes him feel compassion. Both Turner and Christmas die because of their involvement with the white world. Christmas defines himself as a negro by becoming a victim. He chooses to die without defending himself. Turner is taught compassion by a white woman. He tries to atone for his act by forgiving another girl for her whiteness. What is relevant about Faulkner and Styron is that they have fused the theme of the fall of man and that of the fall of the south. They have exploited the idea of the image of dying to express the dignity of human life and its strength and endurance. Faulkner and Styron built their world out of the south's ability to lag behind the rest of America in giving up the romantic sense of the hero and of history. O'Connor and Capote write out of the main stream of American consciousness. Smith, Motes, the Misfit can connect with nothing. They are estranged from themselves. Looming about O'Connor's acts of violence is an immense silence. It is the silence that engulfs the Misfit's polite speech as he shoots the grandmother. It is in this
silence that O'Connor becomes most eloquent. In the short story, "A Good Man is Hard to Find," O'Connor conveys an impression that there is little distinction between living and dying. She conveys a sense of consuming meaninglessness. Where the deaths of Christmas and Margaret carry a significance, no death has much meaning for the Misfit. What freezes him from total emptiness is his gun. In likening the Misfit to one of her dead babies, the grandmother reminds him of his own morality. Her tenderness infantilizes him and minimizes his power as a murderer. She resembles the indefatigably optimistic mothers in O'Connor's fiction. At a moment when the grandmother is the Misfit's victim, she tries to be his redeemer. When she is shot three times in the chest, the Misfit's voice is on the verge of breaking down. He shoots her quickly, and cleaning his glasses, he restores his perspective on life as he orders her to be thrown with the other bodies. O'Connor probably intended the Misfit to be a kind of Christ. But the grandmother who tries to be his mother also tries to be his redeemer, his Christ. Beneath the mask of kindness, it is clear that these two Christs crucify each other. The most powerful crucifixion for O'Connor is the one that is lived out daily for a lifetime which is compounded of human contact,
human needs, and human striving. What endure at the end of "A Good Man is Hard to Find" are two "animals" — the Misfit and the Cat. Both are equally involved in their physical sensations. O'Connor's heroes are neither human nor symbolic, nor heroic in any traditional sense. As Hendin observes:

They are projections of O'Connor's fantasies of revolt; on another they are heroes of our time. O'Connor made fiction out of their emptiness, tragedies out of the ice in their blood. She cut so deep into that ice that she reached the general American tragedy of living in cold blood. This is the tragedy of being totally incapable of tragedy, of pervasive emotional death, of minimum human involvement. In committing herself creatively to characters who have neither soul nor depth, O'Connor made poetry out of the surface of reality.10

O'Connor's impulse is towards reducing all of human feeling to its visible signs like tattoos, pictures, or specific actions. Whereas Faulkner and Styron see their black characters as embodiments of the force of negritude, Flannery O'Connor treats her black characters one-dimensionally. For her, being black is simply another way of being a Misfit in
southern society. The black woman who strikes Mrs. Chestney is no more than a counterpart of the white Protestant Misfit. For Faulkner and Styron, racial conflict is no external thing. It enters the blood of Joe Christmas and the mind of Nat Turner. It launches them on a war against themselves. For O'Connor racial conflict is a "spectacle: a tableau of a black woman hitting a Mrs. Chestney. It is a beautifully wrought cartoon with no 'insides'. O'Connor's is an art of raw power without depth. It has all the force of a series of expletives strung together with great intensity; a sequence of episodes that spontaneously explode, erupt without human guidance or a human source." Flannery O'Connor created a unique art in her time when she wrote in praise of ice in the blood.
REFERENCES:


Subsequent references to O'Connor's stories are to this edition. Page numbers are mentioned in parenthesis against the quotation.


6. O'Connor says in *The Habit of Being*, p. 126, thus:

"What I call a moral basis is a good deal more than a masculine drive," and "all that feminine principle stuff ... is ... a regression from what St. Paul means by charity" (p.394).


