CHAPTER IV

MYSTERY AND MANNERS : THE DISJUNCTION
Flannery O'Connor says in *The Habit of Being* that all her stories are "about the action of grace on a character who is not willing to accept it." Her view of her stories is not always shared by her readers and critics who have interpreted them in ways that she would consider severe distortions of her creative purposes. For example, a number of critics have expressed doubts not only about the religious intent of her work but also about her artistry which they consider is demonic rather than theological. Flannery O'Connor's protagonists may not be able to support the grace that befalls them partly because she fails to rejuvenate sufficiently her spiritual theme. She emphasises to a greater extent the technical demands of the story than the other criteria affecting the portrayal of her characters. O'Connor confronts in her narratives a drastically fallen word. In this world even the remnants of religious belief seem to be vanishing. She explains thus:

*I am a Catholic peculiarly possessed of the modern consciousness, that thing Jung describes as unhistorical, solitary, and guilty. To possess this within the*
Church is to bear a burden, the necessary burden for the conscious Catholic. It's to feel the contemporary situation at the ultimate level. I think that the Church is the only thing that is going to make the terrible world ... endurable; the only thing that makes the Church endurable is that it is somehow the body of Christ and that on this we are fed. It seems a fact that you have to suffer as much from the Church as for it but if you believe in the divinity of Christ, you have to cherish the world at the same time that you struggle to endure it. This may explain the lack of bitterness in (my) stories.

To feel ultimately the contemporary world as the precinct and the medium for the realisation of mankind's salvation through Christ's redemption is to possess an ethos riven with ambivalence. It involves cherishing a world beyond endurance, that is, a world of the spiritually blind and the degenerate. At the level of realism, O'Connor's fiction dramatizes the clashes among her characters in the domain of manners such that their bigotry, pride, and dubiousness are portrayed. What is often noticed in Flannery O'Connor's short story is that the supernatural action of grace remains undetected because of her portrayal of the dubious characteristics of her characters. Where she
introduces an allegorical accent in her work, there is a weakening of its artistry. That means there is a seeming disjunction between mystery and manners in her short stories including such well known ones as "The Artificial Nigger" and "A Good Man is Hard to Find."

"Everything That Rises Must Converge" is a short story in which the disjunction is present but not so pronounced. The short story presents a central locus for the interplay of mystery and manners. But the final resolution is the domestic one. The cohesiveness and the centrality with which this domestic theme is presented in this short story suggests the feminine consciousness of Flannery O'Connor represents a generational pair that defines racism in subtle ways. We find here a grim antagonism between a mother and a son. Julian's actions confirm his isolation from others rather than his convergence with others' viewpoints. He separates himself from his mother. He condescends to take her to her weight reduction classes once a week. He establishes barriers against "the general idiocy of his fellows" by existing in "a kind of mental bubble," where he feels "safe from any kind of penetration from without" (411). His idea of perfect neighbourhood is one of widely separated houses which
is in sharp contrast to his mother's idea. During a conflict with his mother on the bus, he distances himself by looking at her in such a way that he makes "his eyes the eyes of a stranger" (412). Though he secretly longs for the Godhigh Mansion, he criticizes his mother for her classicist memories of lost property and status.

Julian's mother, displaced from the elegant world of her childhood, suffers on account of her practising class conscious mannerisms in a world where social convergence has blurred class distinctions. Her sense of displacement is heightened by her present status of living with her son Julian in a modest apartment in a neighbourhood which is no longer fashionable but deteriorated and dingy. This apartment is quite a contrast to her sense of real home which is conjured up in the image of her grandfather's "mansion." It is towards this mansion that she reverts in the confusion of her fatal stroke at the end of the story. For Flannery O'Connor, home is always heaven. But this story conveys no palpable awareness of the celestial home. Here it is only the lost mansion, not heaven, that the mother in the end seeks as her heritage. Significantly, Julian has an obsessive attachment for the house. He dreams about it and assures
himself that only he, not his mother, could have appreciated the house. Thus in the story "Everything That Rises Must Converge," the symbolic import of the house is enlarged.

Julian's mother is like the other mother types in Flannery O'Connor's fiction. She is blinded by her dependence on the values of the material world. She expresses her views of the world in cliche-ridden terms: "You only live once," "Rome wasn't build in a day," "It takes time ... the world is in such a mess" (411). Her idea of security of life is governed by attitudes of hierarchy and not convergence. Julian and his mother assert difference rather than sameness, though O'Connor's narrative art establishes patterns of sameness. Julian and his mother are alike in their failure to develop. Both the mother and the son dream of the past. Julian accuses his mother of living in "her own fantasy world":

The presence of his mother was borne in upon him as she gave a pained sigh. He looked at her bleakly. She was holding herself very erect under the preposterous hat, wearing it like a banner of her imaginary dignity. There was in him an evil urge to break her spirit. He suddenly unloosened his tie and pulled it off and put it in his pocket.
She stiffened. "Why must you look like that when you take me to town?" she said. "Why must you deliberately embarrass me?"

"If you'll never learn where you are," he said, "you can at least learn where I am." (409)

Ironically Julian also lives according to a romanticised version of himself. Clearly, the mother's vision determines and controls his own. Within the family paradigm, the practical acts that issue from parental bonding show Flannery O'Connor's characters to be unsympathetic as children to their mothers. Julian concludes that his mother is blinded by love for him. His cultivated ability to see her with complete objectivity is one of his severe frailties. Ultimately this rejection is recognised for the evil it was, and Julian tries to establish genuine family ties. He discards his conception of her as a child, ironically after she has physically reverted to her childhood. But it is too late. Looking at the son in the end, the mother finds nothing familiar about him. She has returned to the matrix of her identity, where her world antides and excludes him.

Julian and his mother differ primarily in that Julian is more self-centered and selfish than
his mother. The mother is at least lacking in selfishness to the extent that she supports her son while ignoring his fortunes, whereas the son feels "an evil urge to break (his mother's) spirit" (409). Julian succeeds in this. His aggressively critical attitude towards his mother develops until the mother and the son can no longer recognise each other. The mother too at one stage feels "nothing familiar about him" (419). Her identity depends upon his, which means that when she cannot determine his identity, she cannot carve out her own. She suffers a stroke, and Julian is described here as "looking into a face he had never seen before" (420). It was as though "A tide of darkness seemed to be sweeping her from him" (420). The ending of the story emphasizes the human tendency towards interdependence. But what leads to destructiveness is an inability to recognise the sameness. In terms of imagery of light and darkness this idea is subtly expressed in this story:

The lights drifted further away the faster he ran and his feet moved humbly as if they carried him nowhere. The tide of darkness seemed to sweep him back to her, postponing from moment to moment his entry into the world of guilt and sorrow.

(420)
If the mother's sense of herself is unsuited to the modern temper, Julian's premature world-weariness and misanthropy insulate him from any genuine relationship, even with his mother. As Bryan Wyatt points out, "It is his rejection of her, his figurative killing of her, that projects the 'real world' that he must enter after her death — 'the world of guilt and sorrow'". The story, "Everything That Rises Must Converge," deals with ideas about man's relationship with society and the power of death to confer a new clarity on life. It also shows how an attempt to cling to the past blindly without adapting it to the present and looking forward to the future is wrought with consequences.

"A Good Man is Hard to Find" is a companion piece and one of the most written about stories in the O'Connor canon. The story centres round familial relationships, in particular the son-mother relationship. Bailey's mother, "the Grandmother" lives with him, his wife, and his three children in Atlanta, Georgia. It is typically a suburban family in which John Wesley and June Star are both spoiled and disrespectful brats. They fleece their elders. The mother is nondescript and wears her hair in a rabbit-eared kerchief. The grandmother is a domineering figure, and is the motivating force throughout the story. She suggests a
detour down the dirt road. She secretly takes the cat Pitty Sing that ultimately causes the accident. She recognises the Misfit and ensures her own death. She is in many ways a stereotype. It serves her purpose when she takes the cat and fabricates a story to work her way about the detour. The other character to whom we direct most of our attention throughout the story is the Misfit. His "crime," which he does not remember, his attitude towards Jesus who, he says, threw everything out of balance show him to be a cold-blooded killer who executes six members of a family including two children and an infant. His statements needs to be paid close attention to for two reasons: (1) They are a foil to the grandmother's hypocrisy. (2) They make a statement about latter-day Christians.

Structurally the story can be divided into three interlinked units: departure from Atlanta and the trip to Red Sammy's, the detour and the accident, and the encounter with the Misfit. "A Good Man is Hard to Find" and "The Displaced Person" both contain male characters who stand for physical and psychic rootlessness and consequent moral earnestness that O'Connor repeatedly uses to signify an initial situation for the generation of an authentic Christian perception. Although he is a murderer, the Misfit is
the only character with any sense of what it means to ask morally serious questions about human experience. This quality makes him an eternal Misfit, Christ, as the ambiguous text continuously but ironically indicates when the grandmother unwittingly calls her killer "Jesus" before her death.

"A Good Man is Hard to Find" is also a story in which both the tragic impulse and the comic impulse of Flannery O'Connor are clearly presented. The initial depiction of the family as well as the funny story the grandmother tells about a former suitor has no doubt a comic vein. The convincing grandmother threatens her family with the news that if they proceed with their plans they will be heading in the direction of the Misfit who has escaped from the federal prison. Her obstinacy about going to Tennessee in fact brings about the tragic denouement. She convinces her son Bailey to follow her directions so that the children can hope to discover in the old house non-existent secret panels. The house she seeks is in Tennessee, and not in Georgia through the countryside of which the family is actually driving. Startled by the recollection, she trips her basket holding the cat which she has smuggled abroad against her son's wishes. It is this cat which jumps on the father's shoulders and
causes an accident, placing the family in a vulnerable position. The criminals who come to this scene of accident proceed with their inhuman evil task of exterminating their victims. The Misfit exhibits here a perverse will but there is a point of comparison to be made between him and the self-assertive grandmother. Though the cantankerous old woman is far more sympathetic than the escaped convict, they have both a degree of willfulness where they could both be compared. This story is a study of human will and the need to control or overpower others in the physical world. Subtle patterns of imagery centred on the body reinforce the facts of human biology or physicality and the materialistic tendencies underlying the grandmother's and The Misfit's deficits. The story is sprinkled with images of eating the melon, for example, which the mother explains was eaten by the Negro boy. It is interpreted as a license to indulge once appetite. The focus on eating, pregnancy, and the loss of innocence suggests a certain queasiness about the physical world. It shows a failure to develop beyond the physical needs resulting in the human beings devouring one another. Thus it prepares us for the murders which are savagely perpetrated. Images of eating intensify when the family stops to eat at a roadside cafe. Red
Sammy Butts is a stereo-typical materialist whose eating establishment is guarded at the entrance by a cerberous figure, a chattering monkey. Red Sammy's commercialism introduces yet another strand of imagery whereby images of eating intertwine with those of gross materialism and thus indicate the limitations of a strictly materialistic perspective or orientation. The grandmother, Red Sammy, and the Misfit have a commonness in their reliance on measuring things in terms of mundane experience.

The grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" is like many other mother figures in Flannery O'Connor, with her tendency to "possess." She is dressed "fit to kill" so that "anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady" (118). When the family encounters The Misfit, there is a superficially attractive appearance of him which is misleading and which shows how the images of eating "transmogrify" to images of cannibalism.

The manner in which The Misfit recalls his past but fails to remember why he was imprisoned for patricide, as the prison psychiatrist points out, reveals that he is unaware of his own aggressive impulses. He regresses any sense of guilt resulting from unresolved oedipal conflicts. The Misfit is seen by the grandmother
as "familiar to her as if she had known him all her life" (126). As Suzanne Paulson points out, in Freudian terms what is "familiar" is what is "common," what belongs to the realm of the "familiar" or the "common" is an uncontrolled aggressive wish deriving from infantile experiences. In the light of this, the grandmother's flattery, meant to save her own skin, becomes ineffective. The Misfit explains how he has "seen a man burnt alive" and "a woman flogged" (131). Once a gospel singer, The Misfit is now an undertaker. He cannot believe in Christ's resurrection because he was not a historical witness to the event. He cannot intuit beyond the material world. He is guided by a strong sense of nihilism. His denial of patricidal impulses and his denial of religious truth are captured in a chat with the grandmother wherein he journeys from his personal past through the history of Christianity to utter outrageous savagery.

It is only when facing death does the grandmother recognise that she and The Misfit have something in "common." This recognition goes beyond the fact that the criminal is wearing her son's shirt carrying the "blue parrots" design. The Misfit and the grandmother derive from the same human family tainted by sin and
suffering. Thus The Misfit is discovered to be one of her "own children":

She saw the man's face twisted close to her own as if he were going to cry and she murmured "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 and 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. (132)

The likeness between her and The Misfit, as the grandmother sees, amounts to an epiphany. The image of the child represents innocence, paradoxically. Finally, The Misfit's conclusion that the grandmother would have been a good woman to be shot every minute of her life reflects Flannery O'Connor's Catholicism. Against that implied Catholicism is to be placed the violence The Misfit symbolises:

"Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead." The Misfit continued, "and He shouldn't have done it. He thrown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can — by killing somebody or burning
down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness," he said, and his voice had become almost a snarl. (132)

The story affirms something that Flannery O'Connor saw as lacking in contemporary human relations: unity and transcendence through love. What is looked upon as a cynical and distorted view of human life is seen by O'Connor as an honest representation, though somewhat exaggerated and symbolic, of human suffering. Her art asserts indirectly that we must "look at the worst" and accept it.⁶
REFERENCES:


