INTRODUCTION

On the basis of the relatively few works left by Flannery O'Connor, it is no doubt difficult to understand the legacy of that remarkably valiant and gifted young American writer who departed from life at her home in Milledgeville, Georgia, in the Summer of 1964, after a long and painful illness. The cruel fate which struck her down before her fortieth birthday kept her, unfortunately, from producing a large body of works. But in her two novels — *Rice Blood* (1952) and *The Violent Bear It Away* (1950) — and her two collection of stories, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (1955) and *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1963), she leaves behind material which can be counted amongst the finest fiction produced anywhere by her literary generation. In 1954 "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" was among the short stories in *The O’Henry Awards*. In the following decade, there were only three years in which one of her stories did not appear either in the above collection or in any of the other important prize collections. In 1955 "A Circle in the Fire" won the second prize in *The O’Henry Awards*; subsequently, two of her stories were chosen as the best of the year — "Greenleaf" in 1957 and "Everything That Rises Must Converge" in 1963. Her works have been published outside the United States, in Canada and England and have been translated into French, Greek and German.

What makes Miss O'Connor’s fiction so notable is that
it contains a radical kind of moral judgement mixed with her talent and art. Brainard Cheney, in a tribute, has called Miss O'Connor the most significant writer in our time despite the slender volume left to American letters. Her importance in the contemporary criticism can be ascribed to her prophetic vision, and critical attention to her work has increased with the publication of each of her books.

In 1927, Miss O'Connor published "The Fiction Writer and His Country" and "The Church and the Fiction Writer", two articles which set forth in unequivocal terms her personal beliefs as a writer. She herself saw the relationship between prophecy and fiction. Once she told a college audience, "The Prophet is a realist of distance, and it is this kind of realism which goes into great novels." (E.L., p. 179).

Thus Miss O'Connor was fully aware of such God-given nature of her mission. She told one journalist, "There is the prophetic sense of seeing through reality, and there is also the prophetic function of recalling people to known but ignored truths." Being a prophet herself, she created prophets in her stories and novels; as such, the themes of her stories impart a fuller significance to what everyone experiences and also deal with the vocation of prophetism.

About her first novel Miss Blood, Miss O'Connor said that she could wait fifty years or a hundred years for it to be understood. She further said that "It is a comic novel
about a Christian Maigre' Lui and as such, very serious, for all comic novels that are any good must be about matters of life and death." (n.d., Author's note). A number of leading periodicals, magazines and scholarly journals published reviews of Miss Blood. These reviews, though not altogether sympathetic, some of them even revealing total misunderstanding, proved an implicit recognition of Miss O'Connor's importance as a writer. The publication of A Good Man Is Hard to Find was followed by more and better reviews. Many of the reviews showed a clear understanding of these stories. All these stories are about Original Sin and show the path of Hope and Redemption, the subjects uppermost in Miss O'Connor's mind. She makes it clear that any society which glorifies materialism may find people like Missit of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" on the back roads demanding values other than monetary ones.

Miss O'Connor's second novel The Violent Bear It Away (1960) once again projects the prophet's calling but with greater violence and greater control than shown in the first novel. The issue is more than the making of a prophet; it is: his vocation to baptize. In this novel Miss O'Connor uses Biblical paradigm of the call of a prophet to explore the mystery of a man's freedom to accept or to reject his destiny. And she reveals in this novel the identity and relationship of baptism and death. That the
figure of the last of the Old Testament prophets, John the Baptist overshadows the story is indicated by the epigram itself: "From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent bear it away." (Matthew 11:12). Mason Tarwater, the great-uncle of young Tarwater and uncle of Raybar stands in the role as John the Baptist stands as the last prophet of the Old Testament and the first martyr of the New.

Her inheriting the fatal blood disease and the knowledge of her approaching death perhaps gave Miss O'Connor a knowledge of Redemptive Power of God, and being Irish Catholic, Christianity was imbedded in her. Thus the collection of stories in Everything That Rises Must Converge (1965) affirms the positive and redemptive nature of Christian faith. According to her, death and physical sufferings are not the worst evils in her universe; rather, death provides hope for her characters. The late Thomas Horton in his Tribute to Miss O'Connor says, "I write her name with honor, for all the truth and all the craft with which she shows men's fall and his dishonor." Her stories usually conclude in death or in its fore-shadowing, but there is no despair. Her characters are not to be pitied; rather, they achieve their moment of Grace.

The title of the above-mentioned volume has been taken from the Jesuit Priest, scientist and philosopher --
Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's *The Phenomenon of Man*. Teilhard de Chardin insisted that man is in the process of rising spiritually towards the omega point. Miss O'Connor was deeply influenced by this idea, and she came to accept Teilhard's idea of spiritual evolution. Thus in her later stories (2nd collection) she deals with the inner rising of her characters and dramatizes their arrival at Teilhard's omega point where they achieve significant gains in spiritual energy. The movement of Miss O'Connor's stories is from denial towards acceptance and from awareness of sin towards awareness of salvation.

Miss O'Connor places importance on the relationship between the story and the ultimate reality. She believes that "Writer's moral sense coincides with his dramatic sense." (M.L., p. 31). The revelatory power of the word is consistently the dramatic centre of the stories of the two collections. Anyone who has read her fiction will recognize recurring types of characters, the common themes, the similarity of plot structures — all of which suggest that the literal is being manipulated for allegorical ends. In her themes there is a strange combination of mystery and manners on which she has often commented. The themes of her stories prove her preoccupation with Original Sin, Revelation and Grace. There is a recurring theme of man's fall from innocence and his search for Redemption.
This thesis, therefore, deals mainly with the search for Redemption in Miss O'Connor's fiction. This research work comprises the following six chapters:

1. Themes
2. Region and People
3. Art
4. Religion and Theology
5. Isolation and Death
6. Revelation and Redemption

All the chapters deal with the subject of Redemption and show man's quest to achieve the same.

Because of her being invalid, Miss O'Connor lived a restricted life, and she wrote about people whom she encountered in her daily life on her mother's farm—Andalusia—in her home town Milledgeville, Georgia. Many of these people were illiterate; many were religious fanatics; some were frecks, and all these people find a place in her fiction. One is struck by the fact that in spite of her being Catholic, Miss O'Connor's characters are Protestants. She once explained to sister Mariella Gable that she wrote about "Protestant believers" rather than "Catholic believers" not only because she was surrounded by them but because they expressed themselves in "diverse forms of action"6, that is to say in action which is more easily translated into fiction.
Moreover, Miss O'Connor writes with a strong sense of place. Her country is Georgia where she was born in 1925. Thus the settings of her stories and novels are either Georgia or Tennessee, often backwood or rural areas. Her home obviously supplied the primary materials for her fiction. She recognized "The incredible innocence" of her South, which permitted H. L. Mencken scornfully to call the South, "The Bible belt" (E.L., p. 59). She also recognized the truth of Walker Percy's claim that the existence of great many good Southern writers resulted from the fact that "we lost the war" (E.L., p. 59). Miss O'Connor saw in this loss of war the biblical story of the man's fall.

The people of her South are impetuous people with a deep sense of integrity, and a tendency to make their own laws and to worship God with individual and singular fervour. These backwood people, the immature and childishly simple characters are gripped by and in turn grapple with the immense theological complexity. In their folk language these people can state all that is problematic about human life. The majority of her characters are independent farm owners and their children. They are mostly widows who run their farms with the help of their tenants. Miss O'Connor's characters have been termed grotesque because they are primitive and afflicted both in mind and body. But all her characters have one common denominator: violence. It shoulders beneath the surface in all her stories and in the
end erupts in crime. Miss O'Connor herself says "Violence is capable of returning my characters to reality — and preparing them for their moment of grace." (F.N., p. 112).

For Miss O'Connor Sin, Guilt, Mercy and Redemption are the realities of human life. Louise Consett thinks that for Miss O'Connor, "The lives of her characters are violent, mean, frustrated, twisted and fragmented because man is a sinner." According to Miss O'Connor even that which is good is always under the process of changing and thus may appear less than attractive. When she notices individuals, she sees their human limitations. She depicts this human imperfection but through it searches out the mystery of God's love in the Redemption of the world. In her works the victim and the freak serve as a judgement on shallow, self-serving lives and function as a reminder that the human person is weak and yet has a capacity for the infinite.

In nearly all Miss O'Connor's stories the human action is ultimately related to spiritual reality; hence all her fiction is symbolic. About the symbols she herself says that "a symbol is like the engine in a story" (F.N., p. 99). She uses the traditional symbols of sun, light, woods, trees and peacocks to link the stories with Revelation and Epiphany. Miss O'Connor's religious outlook finds its image in the blazing suns that light her fiction. In her
famous story "The displaced Person", the symbol of Peacock for Christ is clearly visible. In "Good Country People", Bulga's wooden leg is used as a symbol for her soul. Both her novels are tightly unified with the help of symbols. Miss O'Connor had firm belief that attention to reality would lead to truth. Hence she fills her stories with symbolic theology. She immerses her protagonists in the world of phenomena, and thus portrays the character's awareness of the numinous quality of the world.

According to Alfréd Kazin, Miss O'Connor is one of the few Catholic writers of fiction in the post-war period, who manage to fuse a thorough orthodoxy with the greatest possible independence and sophistication as an artist. Miss O'Connor was deeply aware of the sacredness of Reality and being a Southern Catholic, she has all along asserted her unconditional belief in the liberal truth of the Old Christian principles of Redemption, Sin, Grace and Resurrection of Jesus. For Miss O'Connor the chief concern of a fiction writer is "with mystery as it is incarnated in human life." (M.K., p. 68). She embraced the Christian concept of the intrinsic sacredness of matter, and she also had the conviction of the prime importance of truth. Theology is the basis of her fiction, and the concept of the holiness of matter underlies her fiction. Although her world is violent, ugly and grotesque, but at least it
is not hopeless. Miss O'Connor forces the vision back to what may well be Western man's oldest and sometimes only hope — ultimate Redemption through Jesus Christ. She stands firm on a religious conviction, and no major voice in American fiction has done that for a long time.

In order to make her characters reach the moment of Grace and to achieve Salvation, Miss O'Connor has depicted isolation and death in a number of her stories. John A. May thinks isolation to be integral to our understanding Original Sin. Many of Miss O'Connor's stories end in death, but there is a sense of elevation in them. She uses death as an entrance into an awareness of Reality. Death ultimately brings shock and Revelation. In death Hazel Notes of Miss Blood becomes a "Pin point of light". The grandmother of "A Good Man is Hard to Find" achieves Redemption only in death, when she realizes the common bond of humanity. In "Comforts of Home" Thomas's one single yielding to the voice of his dead father, whom he despised during his lifetime, brings the catastrophe and tragedy in the story, but his situation is not hopeless. In time to come he would perhaps see the proper light. Thus in all of Miss O'Connor's stories isolation, death, shock and tragedy are the agents of Revelation, and most of her characters understand the mystery of supernatural when they meet violent death.
Many critics have formed different opinions about Miss O'Conner's work. Nathan A. Scott, Jr., argues that Miss O'Conner not only portrays the gray secular world, but she presents it so violently as to arouse the imagination and render it once again capable of awe and receptive to magnificence. Some critics have explored psychological and sociological matters relevant to the fiction. For example, Algernon Bellif considers The Violent Bear It Away to portray an incestuous homosexual relationship, and Claire Rosenfield contends that Old Mason Tarriner is insane. Keeping the above criticism and arguments in view, this research work deals with Redemption in Miss O'Conner's fiction. The first three chapters show the depth of her themes, her talent in characterization, her use of irony, satire, and violence which bring her characters face to face with realization. The last three chapters deal with her religious beliefs, man's fall due to Original Sin and Redemptive power of Christ.

Even years after her death, Miss O'Conner's reputation in her country is assured. However, it is fairly certain that she will never be free from devastating judgements, but from the number of books and critical articles published about her work following her death, it is certain that she has a permanent place in American literature.
Notes and References


3. These essays have been collected in Flannery O'Connor, Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose, ed. Sally & Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969). Subsequent references from the collected essays in parenthesis refer to the pages of this collection, henceforth known as M.M.


