CHAPTER II

VIOLENCE - VIOLATION: GRACE IN SECULARITY

Flannery O'Connor and J. F. Powers, writing with the sacred Christian mysteries as their prime concern in fiction have, in addition to religious pieces, several stories dealing with secular themes. Taken together, these, perhaps, outnumber the stories that deal with explicitly Catholic materials. Flannery O'Connor's fiction is mostly secular in its background. A very few stories have Catholic settings and a few more use the evangelicals of her region as subject. Even in apparently secular stories, therefore, Flannery O'Connor's preoccupation is with Christian themes, such as the descent of grace and the working out of salvation in the lives of her characters.

J. Cates Smith makes an accurate judgement of O'Connor's theological emphasis:

It is the revelation of the transcendental world of absolute value beyond the cheap, flashy wasteland of modern America that is O'Connor's real concern. She is understandable only in a religious context. If the reality of the transcendental world is denied, as it is in Faulkner, West and other existentialist writers, her literature becomes vulgar farce and is undecipherable. If there is no central mystery in Christ, then for O'Connor, there would be no mystery in life.¹

Powers, too, though he is best known for his stories on the priesthood, has several pieces that have no apparent Catholic background. In addition to five of his stories which are concerned with racial problems, he has others on non-religious subjects. "Ranier" explores the mind of the refugee from Fascism. "Old Bird, A Love Story" describes the pathos of old age. "Blue Island" tells of victimization by salesmen, of newcomers to the suburbs. "Look How the Fish Live" deals with the cruelty of nature, and "Jamestie" is an initiation story of a boy's betrayed adulation of his baseball hero. In Powers also, as in Flannery O'Connor, secular stories have a theological dimension. In the total meaning of his fiction, the individual brings order and understanding to his life by adopting ultimate values which help him to live with, and yet transcend daily problems.

If the theological aspect central to their fiction is taken as the criterion for the classification, Powers and O'Connor may be termed traditional writers. Hoffman observes that in the literature of our century, "the presence of grace testifies to a continuity of tradition."  

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in the lives of the men and women who people their
fiction is the pivotal point in the stories of
Powers and O'Connor. The sequence of events that
climax in spiritual illumination have meaning only
in the context of the culminating religious
experience of the characters involved - their
success or failure in perceiving that revelation
of grace which is essential to a whole and meaningful
existence.

The manner in which grace enters the lives of
these characters constitutes variations of a
formula in the fiction of O'Connor and Powers. In
Flannery O'Connor's scheme of salvation, the
moment of grace brings with it a recognition by
the protagonist of his personal inadequacy in the
face of the evil which threatens him as an external
force in the world; this recognition is most often
achieved after a symbolic, ironic experience of
brutal violence or physical assault. The apathetic
protagonist is reduced from a state of self-
confidence and well-being to utter helplessness
when confronted with an evil beyond comprehension
in its devastating violence.
Powers follows a similar line in his road to redemption, though his means is quieter and more subtle. In Powers, the mark of grace is a humility arrived at by his hero through a recognition of the evil present within himself, a recognition precipitated by a subtle ironic assault on his moral or spiritual values. Powers' protagonist is brought to a realization of his own potentially evil nature when he is faced with choices that call for refined spiritual judgements. In both writers, the entry into grace results in a recognition and admission of one's common humanity, an identification with the lowliest and meekest of mankind.

Violence, integral to the literature of our age, is the technique by which the themes of grace and redemption gain force of vitality in the fiction of Powers and O'Connor. "Much of our literature is a literature of tension caused either by unexpected violence or by the expectation of violence that does not occur."3 Violence fulfills precise

3 Ibid., p. 15.
functions in fiction, functions of revelation and clarification, of surrogate religious experience, and of search for meaning. The issues of life are clarified in violence, or, in the words of Karl Jasper, "The essence of man becomes conscious of itself in ultimate situations." Violence, therefore, paradoxical though it may seem, is an ideal means by which spiritual illumination may be achieved and heightened. The portrayal of violence in O'Connor and Powers, though often extreme, is never gratuitous. Violence plays a vital role as the vehicle of grace and thus contributes to the thematic whole in their fiction.

Closely entwined with violence is the problem of evil, a major element in the fundamental plan of grace in O'Connor and Powers. The recognition of evil is a necessary factor in the path to grace, violence being the agent by which the shock of evil is administered to an apathetic protagonist. An initiation into an awareness of evil is the beginning of a larger understanding of reality. The presence

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of grace is realized, as it were, through an adequate consciousness of the presence of evil.

The stories of O'Connor and Powers selected for analysis below represent a group that follows a major narrative pattern in their fiction. Grace through violence or, in other terms, salvation through catastrophe is achieved in several of the stories of O'Connor and Powers in adherence to a structural pattern of convergent features with, of course, the divergences and variations inevitable in the creative art of two independent and unique minds.

Forecast in the narrative pattern of the stories selected for analysis in this chapter is the type of protagonist, uninhibited, apathetic, or complacent, who has met with no crisis in life or rests in the fatuous belief that he is somehow immune from the ills that befall others. Such a protagonist, exposed to violent assault which if physical may be symbolic also of moral assault, is forced by the divine strategees of the violence inflicted upon him to an experience of grace or spiritual illumination.

A personal encounter with violence initiates
the uninitiated protagonist into the harsher realities of life, into an awareness of the evil, vice, and villainy in the world and into a consciousness of his own vulnerability in such a position. Evil enters the snug, untroubled world of a naive and comfortable hero. It disrupts his routine, forcing him to a reassessment of his personal values and to a rearrangement of his ways. The entrance of evil, into what may have been a moral, predictable, Edenic world necessitates the search for solutions and a quest for grace.

The structural device by which violence and evil, essential to the cumulative progression of the plot pattern adopted by O'Connor and Powers are introduced, is also recurrent. The intrusion of a stranger or group of strangers into a closed and closely knit unit exposes the protagonist to a set of values different from his own and poses a threat from without to the security of his world. The "intruder" is a recurrent figure in the plot formula of these stories. Both writers take care of the technical problem of introducing forces of evil into their plot schemes by means of intrusion or invasion of privacy by an external agent.
The violent encounter with evil in O'Connor and powers is invariably accompanied by a deprivation of some kind endured by the protagonist. Smug in his security, the protagonist is usually deprived of his most prized possession—material, spiritual, or intellectual, and which, in fact, has contributed to his equanimity and self-assurance. The proud possessor is divested of property, education, status, or spirituality and left shocked and defenseless in his hitherto supportive environment. Robbed of the very substance of his security and poise and divested of all the props that had sustained him, the hapless hero is forced to shed any preconceived notions of personal superiority that he may have entertained against his fellowmen. Moral or spiritual pride, financial, intellectual, or racial superiority are recognized and discarded as values shallow and vain. Myths of personal adequacy and self-sufficiency are exploded in the face of crisis. In the light of present helplessness and lack of anchorages, any sense of self-sufficiency on the part of the protagonist is gone forever. He is, instead, brought to recognize and admit his common humanity and to identify with the moment of his brethren. The movement, therefore, is from isolation
to community, from separation and rejection to identification and acceptance. Grace results in wholeness of perspective and oneness of vision.

The measure of violence that the protagonist undergoes may be cataclysmic in its proportions or cold and ruthless in its destructive effect. Hoffman, in analyzing the nature of violence in modern literature makes certain useful observations, especially, on the character of the victimizer in these instances: "The history of violence in the twentieth century (and in its literature) follows somewhat along these lines, in terms of the character of the assailant: the assailant as human being, as instrument, as machine, as landscape. In this last case, the assailant is neither human nor mechanical but the entire environment, the land itself, or the world or the solar system."  

**GRACE THROUGH VIOLENCE:**

Of the narrative elements listed in the structural pattern detailed above, at least one or more find a place in each of the short stories of

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Flannery O'Connor. Violent assault is common to almost everyone of her stories. The most gruesome violence is featured in such pieces as "Greenleaf" or "A View of the Woods."

The reader in response to violence of this kind must assimilate and find explanation for its incomprehensibility and though, in the stories discussed below, violence fulfills a definite purpose, in the fiction especially of Flannery O'Connor there is a need to seek out rational explanation for her techniques. "The strategy of adjustment to this kind of violence usually takes the form of making the generalizations defending it so vast, unreal, unavailible to rational explanation as the circumstance itself." Mrs. May is gored to death by a rampent bull and Mary Fortune's skull is smashed against a rock by her grandfather, who himself collapses under the strain of a violent attack upon him.

Innumerable instances of similar incomprehensible violence are available in other stories: the multiple murders at the end of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find;" the "accident" in which Mr. Quisen of "The Displaced Person" is run over by a tractor, and

ibid.
the physical assaults upon Mrs. Turpin ("Revolution")
and Julian's mother ("Everything That Rises Must
Converge"). Violence in Flannery O'Connor is a
key to redemption and as Josephine Hendin observes:

If she set out to make morals, to praise
the old values, she ended by engulfing all
of them in anACY violence. If she began
by mocking or denouncing her murderous heroes,
she ended by extolling them. Flannery
O'Connor became more and more the pure
pact of the wisest, the damaged daughter,
the psychically crippled - of all those who
are martyred by silent fury and redeemed
through violence.

assault, loss of life or property, the entry
of forces of evil in the form of intruding strangers
are all contained in stories such as "The Displaced
Person," "The Life You Save May Be Your Own,"
"The Comforts of Home," and "The Lame Shall Enter
First." Mr. Cuissac, Shiftlet, Sarah Ham and Rufus
Johnson, respectively, are strangers who invade the
privacy of homes or farm communities to disrupt the
balance of order and everyday routine. With them
they bring altered perspectives to higherr acceptable
values. Mr. Cuissac, with his European background,
sees nothing wrong in marriages between black and
white, an unwitting violation of a rigid Southern
code. Shiftlet brings hope and promise into the

Josephine Hendin, Vulnerable People: A View
of American Fiction Since 1945, Indian Edition
(New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1979),
p. 155.
uneventful lives of the Craters but turns out, in actuality, to be a low-down cad. Sarah Ham and Rufus Johnson, living off the philanthropic ardour and charity of social-minded persons, cause disruption and death in the families of their benefactors.

The tragic losses that accompany the onslaught of violence and evil in each of these stories are set in bold relief. In "The Displaced Person," not only do the farm helps, Mr. Guineac and Mrs. Shortley, meet with violent death, the hired hands are forced to leave, Mrs. McIntyre, who owns the farm, collapses with shock and is bedridden, and the estate disintegrates and falls to seed. Shiftlot, in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," makes away with Mrs. Crater's car and abandons her dim-witted daughter whom he has just married, at a roadside cafe. In "The Comforts of Home," Sarah Ham causes the death of Thomas' mother, and in "The Lamb Shall Enter First," Rufus Johnson drives his benefactor's son to suicide. In each case, faced with the shock of evil which is a recurrent event in O'Connor's stories, the protagonists, whether insouciant widows like Mrs. McIntyre and Mrs. Crater, or self-assured
social workers like Sheppard and Thomas' mother, come to realize their helplessness and inability to cope with the reality of the disasters that befall them.

Flannery O'Connor's short stories are, in a sense, variations or repetitions of familiar themes, images, and motifs. Her characters are drawn from familiar types - the struggling widow managing her property; the sulking, grown-up but dependent son or daughter; the confident, secularized psychologist or social worker; the inevitable cheat, or double-dealer, and the depraved, violent, "criminal-compulsive." In her characterization, O'Connor is usually exaggerated and consistently grotesque. While such repetitions are sometimes tedious and suggest the limitations of an artist's talent, the recurrence of images and symbols in the body of a writer's work provides a basis for a better understanding of his fiction.

Norman Friedman's outline of Kenneth Burke's system of structural analysis may serve as a key to the understanding, also, of Flannery O'Connor's admittedly difficult fiction. He summarizes as follows: "the discovery of image-resurrections in
the body of a writer's work gives clues, not to his personal appearance, history, and temperament, but rather to the central conflict around which his writings are structured...the resolution or 'transformation' of this conflict involves a turning away from one set of values (and their attendant images) and a corresponding turning toward another set.8 The central conflict in Flannery O'Connor's fiction is, always, the tension between good and evil, between belief and unbelief, between a vital religious faith and a dead secularity. An analysis of her short stories brings to the foreground the basic issues of Christian orthodoxy, the need for grace and the means of redemption in the total context of human life, secular and religious, sacred and profane.

While most of Flannery O'Connor's stories may be treated as variations and retellings of a common theme, there are those which adhere very closely to the outlined plot structure and narrative pattern detailed above. The apathetic protagonist brought to grace by means of violent assault, divested of

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material goods and personal possessions and reduced
from security and self-assurance to helplessness
by the invasion of his privacy by external agents,
comes to reassess himself in the light of a crisis
and realize his bond with common humanity. "A Good
Man Is Hard to Find," "A Circle in the Fire,"
"The Comforts of Home," "The Displaced Person,"
"The Life You Saved May Be Your Own," and "Good
Country People," are some stories that closely
follow the details of Flannery O'Connor's major
narrative pattern.

Friedman warns of pitfalls in the analysis of
fiction:

Surely the plot summary of novels is
as reductive as the prose paraphrase
of poems; just as the latter leaves
out exactly those elements which are
essential to the poem as a whole . . .
so too does the former leave out those
elements which are necessary to grasp
the shaping principle binding the events
together - the character and motives of
the protagonist, his state of mind, the
change he undergoes, and the crucial
chain of cause and effect leading him
from one condition to another.9

However, bearing in mind the limitations, one
realizes that plot summaries are inevitable in the

9 Ibid., p. 45.
analysis of short stories. Plot outlines provide, at least, the basic framework and point of reference to which may be related broader themes, principles, and perspectives of the work.

"A Good Man Is Hard to Find," the title story of Flannery O'Connor's first collection is perhaps, her most popular and well-known piece. Widely anthologized, it is the story by which she is recognized and remembered in the college classroom and among non-serious readers of fiction. No critical study of Flannery O'Connor is complete without a consideration of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." This title has, in fact, become synonymous with the name of its author.

The plot of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is divided into two movements. The first part of the story is slow-moving and low in action. A family of six is on its way from Georgia, on vacation to Florida. The husband, wife, baby, two children, and the children's grandmother are revealed as a close-knit group beset by family tensions. The grandmother Saga incessantly at her stubbornly taciturn son, Bailey, and lectures constantly to her grand children. The children bicker among themselves
and are rude to strangers. The underlying tensions
and antagonisms within the family are reinforced by
repeated references to the maniac who is known to
be at large in the area.

While the whole family is portrayed as philistine
and materialistic, the grandmother, senile but
crafty, displays a soul that is as empty as her
mind is remorseful and unscrupulous in attaining
her ends. Determined that the family should visit
relatives in East Tennessee, she fabricates a story
of hidden treasure to excite the children and
persuade her unwaviling son to acquiesce to a detour
in their route. However, as they turn off the highway,
she suddenly realizes that the mansion she claims
to be directing them toward is not in Georgia at
all and that her memory had tricked her drastically.
In her confusion, she kicks over a valise, freeing
her cat that she has smuggled in against her son's
wishes. The spitting feline springs onto Bailey's
shoulder, the car goes out of control, bounces off
the road and overturns into a ditch.

In the second movement, the pace of action that
is thus far built up accelerates to bring the story
to its catastrophe with a Sophoclean swiftness. As
they crawl out of the wreckage unhurt, the family is confronted by three escaped convicts who emerge from another car. Once again, the grandmother with her bungling instinct for trouble, unintentionally blurts out the name of the misfit, leader of the group whom she has recognized from his picture in the newspaper. There is now no alternate course of action. The family is led off into the woods and shot. The grandmother is the last to be killed and, in her desperation, she pleads with the outlaw on grounds of religion, good breeding, and personal materialistic values. In a final moment of grace, however, she is touched by selflessness. But her very gesture of acceptance, and forgiveness upsets the balance of innate evil that the "misfit" has subscribed to all his life. In what may be considered a reiteration of his own order of things, he pulls the trigger on the old woman. The final picture is grim, as the killers look upon "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 smilling up at the cloudless sky."10

"A Good Man Is Hard to Find" follows a typical plot pattern in Flannery O'Connor. It treats of an encounter with a stranger who intrudes into a closed family unit. The Bailey family is a typical American family that meets with very untypical circumstances. The description of individual members portrays them as carefully characterized. Bailey, the father, harassed and irritable, his wife, with a face "as broad and innocent as a cabbage" (p.117), the children, obnoxious and saucy, and the xenophobic, racially condescending, self-righteous grandmother. The difference in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is that, here, while the stranger does not intrude into their circle, the family sets out for the disastrous meeting with the visit from Florida and chance circumstances along the way take them away from their secure world onto violent encounter.

The violence, in this story, is excessive and oppressive. It comes as a shock following the slow though inexorable movement of the first half of the plot. The shock of the sudden deaths is suggestive of a nihilistic, incomprehensible view. However, as Hoffman observes, "one may say that any violence
is comprehensible if it is inflicted upon another by personal means within the view of the victim, or at least within the range of the victim's expectation. Any violence which goes beyond these limits is not comprehensible, and it upsets the calculus of understanding in the matter of dying. In the case of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," violence demonstrates the efficacy of grace which operates in extremity. That the author found it necessary to use violent death as a means to an end does not decry faith in immortality. "Violent death does not in itself need to involve the destruction of a belief in immortality...if the circumstance of death is consistent with the energy of one's earning it then the balance of life, death, and immortality may still be maintained."

The misfit's method of dealing death to the Bailey family may seem beyond expectation and desert. However, Flannery O'Connor uses several devices to bring the plot to the point of the inevitable massacres. That the maniac is roaming the area, and

11 Soffran, p. 12.
12 Ibid.
that the family has chosen this time to travel; that they should decide upon a detour and meet with an accident which leads them into the clutches of their killer are sequences, if not explanations, which lead to their deaths. The maniacal nature of the misfit brings the impersonal attack upon the Baileys within range of comprehensibility. The plot, however, depends largely upon chance, and, as W.S. Fekete points out, the loud voice of death to bring the protagonist to her moment of grace:

"...the 'ACCIDENT' that...is occasioned by the sudden and expressly forbidden presence of the grandun's cat, may also fall into the categories of moral and metaphysical necessity. Still, the plot leans heavily and deliberately on chance, and especially on the absurdity of accidental death. In Flannery O'Connor's existential universe all events, including whatever acts of poetic justice the reader may happen to see, are essentially unpredictable, beyond human control, and, in a strict sense, accidental. It is only death, however, that speaks loudly enough to convince man of his foolish self-deceptions."

It is violence, ultimately, that forces the protagonist, as well as the reader, in Flannery O'Connor, to accept the reality of evil. The grandmother with her venereal faith in religion and

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good breeding refuses to believe that the visit is evil. She tries to convince him that he is really good, that he is of good stock, that he had perhaps been committed to the penitentiary by mistake. However, when all her arguments and rationalizations fail, she is forced to accept the unpleasant truth of unadulterated evil present in glaring reality. Ultimately violence in Flannery O'Connor's fiction forces the reader to confront the problem of evil and to seek alternatives to it. Time and again in her stories violence intrudes suddenly upon the familiar and seemingly secure world and turns the landscape into a secular hell. 1

The grandmother in a "Good Man Is Hard to Find" is perfectly characterized. As epitome of respectability, she clings to the remnants of Southern gentility and manners. Racially condescending and religiously haughty, she prides herself on false values and niceties to the extent of seeming absurd:

Her collars and cuffs were white organdy trimmed with lace and at her neckline she had pinned a purple spray of cloth violets containing a sachet. In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady. (p. 115)

Ironically, the grandmother is dressed to meet her fate. As Hiles Orwell points out, "she is somewhat profligate in this regard, for if she is not precisely dressed to kill, this remnant of Southern gentility is, as it turns out, dressed to be killed." The old woman must be relieved of all the notions of superiority that prop her ego before she is prepared to face the reality of evil and her need for grace. As her son is led off to be shot by the misfit's accomplices, in a gesture that bespeaks irony, "the grandmother reached up to adjust her hat brim as if she were going to the woods with him but it came off in her hand" (p. 126). When her long arguments and poor persuasions fail to affect the maniac, she is reduced to pleading. In the offer she makes she betrays the vanity of faith in false values:

"Jesus!" the old lady cried. "You've got good blood!" I know you wouldn't shoot a lady! I know you come from nice people! Pray! Jesus, you ought not to shoot a lady. I'll give you all the money I've got!"

"Lady," the misfit said, looking beyond her far into the woods, "there never was a body that give the undertaker a tip." (pp. 131-32)

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If the story had to end at this juncture with the death of the grandmother it would present a hopeless and nihilistic view of life. However, the grandmother, in her moment of crisis, comes to a realization of grace. When all her arguments have failed and she is faced with the ultimate, in a sudden impulse of selflessness she looks upon the man in front of her with eyes of compassion and reaches out to him in identification and acceptance: "You're one of my own children" (p. 132). In her final triumph, the grandmother gives up misconceptions of reality to experience her moment of grace. For her, as for others, as Dowell observes, "without exception this moment comes at great price." 15 A critical situation brings out the highest in her. In the words of the wiffit, "she would of been a good woman,...if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life" (p. 133).

The wiffit has been considered by many to be the protagonist of the story. While Flannery O'Connor herself deplored the misplaced sympathy

given to the misfit as a social outcast, he is as clearly drawn and vital a character as the grandmother in the story. A psychopathic killer, the misfit is a combination of the classic American drifter and morbid sophisticate that lends him credibility as a character. His childhood and assorted career, as recalled to the grandmother, reveal him as a rather homespun type. Quite unlike the grandmother, however, who is only superficially committed to good and who has no real faith in God, the misfit exemplifies a total commitment to disbelief and evil. In the perversity of his logic, he believes that there can be no middle course between total commitment to good and total commitment to evil. Listening to the pious, platitudinous arguments of the grandmother who stands for time at his hands, the killer rationalizes:

"Jesus was the only one that ever raised the dead...and He shouldn't have done it. He threw 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 by doing some other weakness to him. No pleasure but weakness..." (p.132)
It is Flannery O'Connor's conviction that definite commitment of some sort is essential for genuine freedom, whether a commitment to good or a commitment to evil. Like Dante and T.S. Eliot, she has no room for those neutralists who do not subscribe to any specific religion or belief. In her view there is no neutral ground in matters of faith. One has to decide, like the misfit, to belong to one camp or the other. Furthermore, lack of commitment is, by her standards, as dangerous as a commitment to evil, for without Christ one's actions can lead only to evil. The grandmother's part in the undoing of the family exemplifies this viewpoint.

The misfit, again, in contrast to the grandmother who has mistaken notions of reality, is aware of the innate evil of his personality. He insists, despite the old woman's protests and persuasions, that he is not a good man. Ironically, in his spiritual honesty, the misfit is superior to the hypocritical grandmother for he takes the question of good and evil seriously. He has no false notions or illusions about his own goodness and no props to his religious ego. He has an awareness of evil that
the grandmother and other characters in the story do not share— an awareness that in contrast to a morally blinding belief in one's own virtue could be "the beginning of all wisdom, the first step towards faith." 17

However, despite his intellectual closeness to the truth, the misfit fails to find the vision of grace that he nostalgically yearns for. He fixes the redemptive act of Christ in time and denies the ongoing action of mercy. "Listen lady," he said in a high voice, "if I had of been there I would of known and I wouldn't be like I am now." (p. 132). It is at this moment of the misfit's denial that the grandmother, reduced by crisis to a realisation of her own spiritual and intellectual poverty, achieves her moment of grace and is able to establish a relationship with the vilest of humankind.

"A Good Man Is Hard to Find" has been described as oppressive in its violence and its near-nihilistic view of life. The harshness with which the author

puts forth her ideas has been received with
disapproval. Martha Stephens complains that in
"A Good Man Is Hard to Find," "the idea is being
sprung like a trap in one's face in the end."18
However, Flannery O'Connor's own estimate is that
this is one of her best stories and that it
conveyed her message most effectively. She has
provided a perspective which she felt would remove
any difficulties in interpretation that the piece
may present: "In this story," she directs, "you
should be on the lookout for such things as the
action of grace in the grandmother's soul, and not
for the dead bodies."19

In a letter to John Hawkes, who insisted upon
interpreting her work as leaning heavily toward
the diabolical, Flannery O'Connor writes:

More than in the Devil I am interested in
the indication of grace, the moment when
you know that grace has been offered and
accepted - such as the moment when the
grandmother realizes the visit is one of
her own children. These moments are
prepared for (by me anyway) by the intensity
of the evil circumstances.20

18 Martha Stephens, The Question of Flannery O'Connor
(Sacramento: Louisiana State University Press,
19 Extract from the O'Connor papers, Georgia
College Library, quoted by Martha Stephens,
The Question of Flannery O'Connor, p. 36.
20 The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor,
ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus
Stephens, however, cannot forego that the story itself is ambiguous, obscure, and lacking in clarity. She points out that "...while it is interesting to know the intent of the author, speaking outside the story and after the fact, such knowledge does not change the fact that the intent of the narrator manifested strictly within the story is damagingly unclear on this important point." 21

"A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is complex both in structure and theology. Its specific Christian interpretation is not pleasant or popular. Its harshness is undeniable. However, placed in the context of Flannery O'Connor's total work, it is one of her finest stories. It stands representative of her fiction and illustrative of the idea of grace through violence as one of her major themes.

The central dramatic symbol of the intrusion of an alien figure, grotesquely evil, upon the settled life of a character which forces upon him a wholly new order of experience and identity is common also to Flannery O'Connor's pastoral piece, "Good Country People." Hanley Pointer, the Bible

salesman, is deceptively polite. While the misfit comes away with Bailey's shirt, and Shiftlet takes away with Mr. Grater's automobile, Pointer leaves with Rulga's wooden leg.

The story is set in a Southern farm, again, a disarmingly routine environment which, however, serves as a stage for disarmingly unroutine revelations. On the farm, religion is relegated to the attic, philosophy is limited to familiar banalities, and conversation is fixed in an unbroken, repetitive pattern of cliché's. The climactic action of the plot takes place in the duration of a single morning and revolves on the archetypal pattern of initiation into evil. The protagonist, Rulga Hopewell, is a thirty-two year old Ph.D. who imagines that her formal education has prepared her to recognize evil in all its guises. She discovers through a rude initiation that the realities of experience outrun all possibilities of metaphysical speculation.

Joy-Rulga is a sulking, spoilt child who, because of a weak heart, has been unable to make her escape into the world. She finds herself totally unsuited to life on the farm and makes
known her discontent by stamping around on her wooden leg, accentuating her deformity. Her mother, Mrs. Hopewell, and their hired woman Mrs. Freeman, both regard her as a child though they are puzzled by aspects of her behaviour. They too, though not in an intellectual sense, are complacent and superior in their attitudes. "Mrs. Hopewell had no bad qualities of her own but she was able to use other people's in such a constructive way that she never felt the lack" (p.272). Mrs. Freeman could never admit that she was wrong on any point. Into this world of vanity and self-pride enters Panley Pointer in the guise of an innocent unsophisticated backwoods Bible salesman, who opens up to them a world of corruption and evil that they had hitherto been blind to.

When Mrs. Hopewell in approval of Pointer's country ways invites him to stay for dinner, her daughter Hulga hits upon a plan of seduction that she believes will effect a union between total sophistication and total innocence. Intending to play intellectual Eve to an untouched Adam, she thinks through every detail, turning over in her mind
the minutest philosophical possibilities: "She imagined that she took his remorse in hand and changed it to a deeper understanding of life. She took all his shame away and turned it into something useful" (p. 274). Pulga tries to impress Pointar, whom she believes to be a raw, young innocent, with her philosophy: "I’m one of those people who sees through to nothing...we are all damned...but some of us have taken off our blindfolds and see there’s nothing to see. It’s a kind of salvation" (pp.267-68).

Manley Pointar, however, is quite equipped for the encounter in the hayloft into which Pulga has persuaded him. He turns the tables on Pulga’s seduction scheme and persuades her first to show him where her wooden leg is joined on, then to remove it for him. Having made herself vulnerable, Pulga is shocked to find that the country boy is not so simple after all. He is armed with whiskey, contraceptives and a pack of pornographic cards which he carries in his hollow Bible.

Pulga, like the grandmother in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," tries to cling to a wishful hope that there must be some streak of goodness in the man. "Aren’t you...just good country people?" (p.290).
she pleads. But pointer is wicked through and through. As he adds Hulga's log to the collection of obscene objects in his suitcase, he tells her: "I may sell Bibles but I know which end is up and I wasn't born yesterday and I know where I'm going" (p. 290). In a final taunt that shatters Hulga's intellectual ego, he adds: "I'll tell you another thing, Hulga...you ain't so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!" (p. 291), and leaves her to unravel the meaning of her first practical encounter with evil. Preston Browning defines the confrontation in "Good Country People" and elaborates on the meaning of the conflict:

...what is involved in the encounter between Hulga and Pointer is a confrontation between a facile, superficial and finally sentimental nihilism and a nihilism which, while completely non-intellectual, is nonetheless real and implacable. Hulga's mean-spirited perversity proves merely a façade, behind which lives a secret self wrapped in naiveté, superficialities, and petty self-indulgence; and when she is forced to acknowledge the existence of a perversity profounder than her own - more a part of the scheme of things, because partaking more fully of evil is a metaphysical reality - she responds with incredulity, shock and impotent rage.22

Hulga Hopewell loses more than her wooden leg before she understands the factual presence of evil in the world. She is deprived of her most prized possession, her faith in her intellect and powers of reasoning. She is made to realize the emptiness of her all philosophies. In the society which is defined by the grandmother and the misfit, as Walter Sullivan points out, the central conflict is between those who are driven by God and those who believe in their own self-sufficiency. In the heavily ironic "Good Country People," the conflict is between two of the godless. Hulga the Ph.D., deprived of her wooden leg by pointer, the sham Bible salesman. "Yet more than this, she is robbed forever of her belief in the final efficacy of the rational process."23

"Good Country People" follows a narrative pattern similar to that of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." However, here the actual physical violence is minimal. The impact of evil is brought about by a violation more psychological than physical. Hulga has not merely been outmarted by a country bumpkin.

She embodies pride and intellectual superiority overturned. Pointer stands to remind that pure evil, in all its vulgar attributes, persists in the world whether we care to acknowledge it or not. As Kulga's instructor in the fundamental fact of evil, he points out that "one does not have to take a Ph.D. to become the devil's disciple. Depravity and its rituals are easily learned without benefit of seminar or graduate lecture."  

"A circle is the first" is one more story clearly representative of a common narrative pattern. It utilizes the motif of intruders who drive home the harsh lesson of evil to a self-sufficient and unrealistic protagonist through a sudden, shocking act of violence. Mrs. Cops, efficient proprietress of a very productive and well-maintained farm, ironically, "was always worrying" (p. 176). However, out of a smugness born of prosperity and good fortune, she felt confident that she was capable of handling any situation without panic or desperation. She was constantly reminding herself of all her material benefits and felt she was.

somewhere invulnerable to the common misfortunes of others. "Everyday I say a prayer of thanksgiving..." (p. 177), she says, believing that in this she has a special formula against calamity.

In reality, Mrs. Cope's religion is a faith in her own resourcefulness and ability to deal with contingencies, in short, to cope. "I don't let anything get ahead of me and I'm not always looking for trouble" (p. 178), she explains indulgently to Mrs. Pritchard, who does not share her sanguine faith in the predictability of the human situation. Mrs. Pritchard, however, unconvincing, persists in efforts to make Mrs. Cope realize that there are circumstances under which she would have to admit inadequacy, when "...it would be nothing you could do but sling up your hands" (p. 178). When the three boys, instruments of evil, finally arrive, bringing with them, as Mrs. Pritchard senses, impending disaster, she warns Mrs. Cope: "like I teljer---there ain't a thing you can do about it" (p. 188).

Mrs. Cope's attitude in life is one of personal immunity against misfortune. Browning summarizes her predicament thus:
Much in the manner of the Pharisee in the parable, Mrs. Cope has for years been saying, in effect, I thank thee that I am not as other men are. True, her pride is not as much in her moral perfection as in what she calls her "blessings." "Lord, we have everything," she exclaims at one point. So believing herself immune to those ills which plague the generality of men and placing excessive confidence in the potency of her own intelligence and will, Mrs. Cope is totally unprepared for the shattering discovery that finally comes, that there is no escaping "the human condition." 25

The arrival of the three boys on the farm introduces the tension of conflicting values into a sheltered, prosperous environment. The boys describe unpleasant details of life on a development, distant and alien to the freshness of farm life. Powell and his friends, Garfield and Harper, look with envy at the luxuries of space and wideness that Mrs. Cope's farm affords in contrast to the cramped and nauseating existence they have to put up with in the tenements. Mrs. Cope, on the other hand, preoccupied with her blessings, has lost touch with her less fortunate fellowmen. Pride of possession has robbed her of charity.

Both Mrs. Cope's young daughter and Mrs. Fritchard feel a sense of imminent danger. If Mrs. Cope, like Bulga Hopewell is uninstructed into evil, Mrs. Fritchard is down to earth in her judgements. Her first reaction on seeing the expressions of the three restless teenagers is one of caution. "You take a boy thirteen year old is equal in naiveness to a man twice his age. It's no telling what he'll think up to do" (p. 186), she worries. While Mrs. Cope is optimistic and does not anticipate any negative reactions from the boys, Mrs. Fritchard is wary: "I look for them to strike just after dark" (p. 190). The child, also, is wiser than her mother. She urges direct action and while the older woman foolishly closes her mind to reality, the child waits, trembling, for the catastrophe to strike: "she [Mrs. Cope] began a litany of blessings, in a stricken voice, that the child, straining her attention for a sudden shriek in the dark, didn't listen to" (p. 190).
The manner in which Mrs. Cope tackles the boys who intrude upon the privacy of her farm is reminiscent of that of the grandmother in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." Having given them food, she expects them to "act like gentlemen" and believes "they'd be gone in the morning" (p. 165). She appeals to them firmly and calmly, then threatens to call the sheriff. "Mrs. Cope spoke slowly, emphasizing every word" (p. 189). Her sweet persuasions and platitudinous arguments, in the face of the innate evil she confronts, are as irrelevant as those that the grandmother puts forward to the maniacal misfit: "Do you boys thank God every night for all He's done for you..." (p. 154). Mrs. Cope enquires,

Mrs. Cope must be deprived of her proudest possession, the farm she has so carefully tended, before she can acknowledge the reality of evil and learn to accept a common lot with the rest of humanity. In a larger context, she must give up her unshakable confidence in her own competence and realize the limitations of her own ability to manage a difficult situation. "Mrs. Cope, like Oedipus, discovers that to be human is to stand in a field
bounded by fallibility, finitude, suffering and fate. And only by means of the shock of evil, the inescapable confrontation with an irrational and intractable malignancy is she brought to this awareness.  

As she watches with shocked eyes, the flames rising on her property and the figures of the incendiaries silhouetted against the firelight, Mrs. Cope experiences a misery which equates her to all whom she has thus far scorned or pitied. The identification is total, crossing, as in stories such as "Revelation" and "The Displaced Person," barriers of race and class, uniting finally, as in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," with the evil element itself: "...the face of the new misery...on her mother... looked old and it looked as if it might have belonged to anybody, a Negro or a European or to Powell himself (p. 193).

The moment of grace, when it comes, brings reconciliation between Mrs. Cope and her stubborn daughter. Always wiser and more knowing, the child,
who has been aloof and estranged in her attitude toward her parent, shares in the sorrow that has befallen them. That for the first time in the concluding lines of the story Mrs. Cope is referred to as "her mother" is proof of the fact that the cords of sympathy between Mrs. Cope and her daughter, worn thin, have not been broken. As Martha Stephens observes, "That the child does not stand outside this misery when it comes seems exactly the proper touch; for of course the point is that no one can remain a witness to the common plight." 27

"A Circle in the Fire" accomplishes a grace that is complete and perfect in its achievement, as does no other story in his group. While Hulga Hopewell's imitation into evil prepares her for such an experience, she has not actually been through a purification by grace at the end of the story. Mrs. Freeman and Mrs. Hopewell, continue in their complacency and ignorance and remain unchanged by Pointer's visit to their farm. The grandmother in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" reaches

her climactic moment of revelation in an experience that is personal and individual. "A circle in the fire," however, depicts a corporate experience of spiritual understanding that reconciles the estranged and unites the divided.

The violence by which grace is achieved, in these and other stories of Flannery O'Connor which follow a similar plot pattern, comes without warning or premonition. It is sudden and sweeping, purifying as it destroys. In each case, violence intrudes into a quiet, humdrum existence to reorder and reorganize it. Hoffman explains the technical role of such violence: "Surprise is an element of the fact of violence in modern life. A carefully plotted pattern of expected events has always been needed to sustain a customary existence. A sudden break in the routine challenges the fullest energy of man's power of adjustment. Suddenness is a quality of violence. It is a sign of force breaking through the design established to contain it."²⁶

enters evil, a force to be reckoned with. Evil in "Good Man Is Hard to Find" is the terror of the meeting with the maniac on the highway and the cold-blooded murder of a family. In "Good Country People" it is the sly perversion of a bible salesman, and in "A Circle in the Fire," the natural tendency for destruction in three teenagers. Evil brings the self-righteous to an acknowledgment of their own inadequacies, and to a realization of their share in the sinfulness common to man. As Browning points out, "The shock of evil is, recurrently, a central event in Flannery O'Connor's work, and in each case the initiate into what Hawthorne called 'the sinful brotherhood of mankind' experiences a sense of utter helplessness as he is made to confront a dimension of reality whose very existence his positivism or his positive thinking has prompted him to ignore."29

The self-sufficiency and materialistic preoccupation of the protagonists in these stories is in direct contrast to the evils that befall them.

29 Browning, in Adversity and Grace, p. 140.
"See, these stories seem to say, devastation, and annihilation always round the corner, and yet the godless go on acting as if they held their fates in their hands."\(^30\) The disasters that overtake these people in their struggle towards materialistic ends are not without purpose. The violent shocks to the characters' egos force them to see themselves in a true light, as they really are. As Flannery O'Connor herself elaborates in a letter to Nelsen Hall, "It is almost impossible to write about supernatural grace in fiction. We almost have to approach it negatively. As to natural grace, we have to take that the way it comes - through nature. In any case, it operates surrounded by evil."\(^31\)

Finally, there is, in Flannery O'Connor's plan of grace through violence, a choice to be made. To choose good over evil is to be redeemed and to choose evil over good is to be damned. But, not to choose at all is to be equally lost. Flannery O'Connor seems to have more sympathy for the overtly evil than for the wilfully ignorant. The misfit, conscious of his moral responsibility

\(^{30}\) Martha Stephen, p. 5.

\(^{31}\) The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor, p. 245.
to distinguish right from wrong, is treated with more respect than know-nothing Mrs. Hopewell. Liberal Christianity, with its neutral values, is alien to Flannery O'Connor's stern sense of judgement. In her order, grace is imperative, and violence, if necessary, is its vehicle.

THE PRESENCE OF EVIL

In an assessment of the work of J.F. Power, Flannery O'Connor divides Power's stories into two kinds — those that deal with the Catholic clergy and those that don't. "Those that deal with the clergy are as good as any stories being written by anybody; those that don't are not as good..."32 She concludes. The basis for this judgement may be questioned.

While some of Power's early stories are immature and lack the controlled skill of his later work, he does have stories with non-religious backgrounds which are excellent examples of the quality of his craftsmanship and the strength of his narrative ability.

Best known for his stories on Catholic settings, Power himself, however, asserts the need for a

32 The Habit of Being, p. 267.
secular approach in fiction both in communicating with a modern audience and in acquiring for one’s art a complete and whole perspective. “All stories today should take place in supermarkets, the modern square, battlefield and ranger,” he states. Ten of the sixteen stories that Powers published in the first five years of his career are secular in theme and setting. In these his concern extends to the black, the refugee, the immigrant, the stranger to the city, the aged, and the very young.

The titles discussed below are a selection of Powers’ secular stories which follow variations of a narrative pattern similar to that commonly employed by Flannery O’Connor. However, Powers, it may seem, despite his quiet and controlled style, is far more intense in the evil he portrays in these instances at least than is Flannery O’Connor. These specific examples belie the common notion that while Flannery O’Connor’s is a blood-chilling fiction, Powers portrays a less grim view of mankind.

“Unmistakably harsh in these stories, Powers’

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world, as seen in these examples of his fiction, does not offer the escape into grace that is everywhere present in Flannery O'Connor. In "Look How the Fish Live," "Blue Island" and "Lions, Harts, Leaping Does," the nature of the assault that Powers' protagonist is subjected to is moral rather than physical. The attack is on the mind and spirit and not on the body. In each case, the protagonist, faced with a subtle attack on his personal values, finds himself deprived of that very moral and spiritual certainty which has sustained him in daily life. Spiritual pride and notions of moral superiority are demolished to make the protagonist conscious of his common identity in the daily working of an impersonal universe.

while an intrusion from without in the form of persons or things impinges on the complacent consciousness of Powers' protagonist and makes him aware of the presence of evil, that evil itself is an introspective factor, a quality within rather than outside him. The awareness of evil is an acknowledgement, not of external negative influences, but of one's own failings and lack of grace, of one's personal potential for wrong action or of one's incapacity for any meaningful action at all. Evil is
recognised as a force present within Powers' protagonist who, in acknowledging his own vices, must maintain identity with the finite and the fallible.

Powers not only has what both Trilling and Mcdonald agree is a rare virtue in a modern writer—the ability to imagine virtue—but he also has the ability to portray virtue in its complex relations with evil, an ability that includes, though it may go considerably beyond, the ability to confront ambivalence. Indeed, the complexity of Powers' moral vision is almost paradoxical, since it is revealed in a neat, witty and restrained style that by itself would seem to promise the more abstract and simple moral vision of a writer like Evelyn Waugh.34

In "Look How the Fish Live" Powers' protagonist concludes that "all problems are at bottom theological."35 In secular stories as in his religious pieces it is clear that God is at the centre of Powers' universe and that Powers' problem in fiction is basically a question of divinity, whether in men or in nature. His use of secular images and symbols reflect ideas that are religious in their overtones.

"Look How the Fish Live" is a meditative story which considers a preponderant issue in extremely hourly terms. Man's confrontation with nature, usually presented in terms of the wild and the vast,

occurs here in a conflict that is small and everyday. The familiar environment of the home and family however heightens rather than diminishes the horror of a mechanical Darwinian world. "Look How the Fish Live" is sad and despairing. Here, there is no escape from the grip of unalterable cosmic circumstances and, as George Sceuffas observes, this later work of Powers "comes perhaps closest of all his stories to overt despair over the human condition."36

The plot of "Look How the Fish Live" is deceptively simple. A baby bird has fallen out of its nest and has been rescued by the children of the family. The father, a sensitive and responsive person, finds that he is now faced with the responsibility of restoring the bird to its parent. The bird brings with it moral responsibility. An intrusion into the personal world of the protagonist, it confronts him with larger issues of life, the place of man in the natural order, the extent of his responsibility and the bounds of his limitations. That the bird is a dove is significant not only

because in the nature of things, "Any bird but the dove would try to do something." As the Christian symbol of the Holy Spirit, of peace and hope, the dove brings, along with an awareness of the divine, an awareness also of the presence of pain and evil in the world and added moral obligation to the protagonist:

Somewhere in the neighbourhood this baby dove's mother was posing on a branch like peace itself, with no thought of anything in her head.

"God," he groaned. (p.4)

The responsibility of caring for the bird falls upon the children's father, who realizes his inadequacy in trying to set right what seems to him a failure of nature. The faith that the children place upon his ability to cope with the emergency makes him only more aware of his own lack of faith in himself and in his limited resources:

Now they punished him with their faith in themselves and the universe, and later, when these had failed and the bird began to sink, they would punish him some more, with their faith in him.... But why did animals and birds do this to him? Why did children? (p.6)
The helpless protagonist questions his part in the event itself. In a deterministic ordering of nature, he believes that in the struggle for survival, nature could not expect man to compensate for her failing. He seeks to avoid responsibility for the bird's protection:

"why'd you pick this bird up? why didn't you leave it where it was? The mother might have found it then."

"The mother bird has to feed a baby like this."

why couldn't the two parents get together and just put it back in the nest? Why, down through the ages, hadn't birds worked out something for such an emergency?...Here was a case that showed how incompetent nature really was. He was tired of such cases, of shoving the buck to him.... (pp. 6-7)

Looking up at the dilapidated, poorly-constructed nest and at the unconcerned parent bird, the protagonist turns away in disgust. Again, he wishes to place the responsibility into more competent hands: "...it was a job for the fire department or for God, whose eye is on the sparrow..." (p.6)

Powers' protagonist tries to compensate for his own diminished faith by rationalizing his
way back to a faith in the balance of nature. However, he is confused at his own role in the Darwinistic process. Summer brings the mosquitoes, and in the interests of human comfort he has had to spray the yard with DDT. The harm this causes to the birds is inevitable. The children, keepers of his conscience, remind him that a rabbit weakened by the crocuses placed among the lilies has been captured by a weasel. "There'd be too many of these doves if things like that didn't happen....Look how the fish live" (p. 18), his neighbour Mr. Hahn consoles. But platitudes are poor comfort to the protagonist who realises that he too has joined the cycle of killers and killed.

"Look How the Fish Live" gives expression to an essentially Darwinistic view of nature. Parallel instances from Powers' novel, Morte D'Urban, help to clarify his ideas on the natural order. In expression of a problem almost identical to that presented in "Look How the Fish Live," Powers explains in Darwinistic terms the avarice of the Bishop of Great Plains: Half the fun of the big frog is having the little ones around
him. Again, Father Urban's cutting down of infected elm trees, an incident comparable to the DDT spraying in "Look How the Fish Live" indicates, as Bates observes, a comprehension of nature and man's relation to it: "Nature is in and around the godly man, but it is not beneficent. He must control it or transcend it." 

Powers presents, in this story, the contradictions in the working of Nature. His acceptance of disorder is not a surrender to circumstances but an acceptance of status quo. A crucial point is arrived at when the protagonist faces up to the disorder of nature and accepts it. The subtle process of his spiritual education is rooted in reality and nourished by an ability for compassion. Like Flannery O'Connor's protagonists who learn to accept a common humanity, Powers' central character in "Look How the Fish Live" arrives at an understanding of his own place in the natural order of the universe. The culminating vision is a vision of human limitations.

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"I'm sick of it all."

"Insects, birds, and animals of all kinds," he said. "Nature."

"That includes children," he said, pursuing his original line. It was the children who were responsible for bringing the failure of nature to his attention.

"and women," he added. He had almost left women out, and they belonged in. They were responsible for the children..."and men," he added...."We were at the bottom of it all.

"That doesn't leave much, does it?" said Mr. Hahn.

"No." Who was left? God. It wasn't surprising for all problems were at bottom theological. He'd like to put a few questions to God. God, though, knowing his thoughts knew his questions, and the world was already in possession of all the answers forthcoming from God.... (p. 15)

In his final tirade against the entire social order, Peers' protagonist realizes, after he has attributed blame for his predicament upon all of nature and humankind, that he must include God, too, in his roll-call of defaulters. However, in the resignation that he achieves at the end of the story, he admits, at last, that in assuming responsibility for fellow-creatures of nature he
must accept his own human limitations. The preservation of species or the maintenance of ecological balance could not rest in the hands of a single individual, however well-intentioned and compassionate.

The cat ran out of the yard. Where were the birds? They could be keeping an eye on the cat. Somewhere along the line they must have said the hell with it. He supposed there was a lesson in that for him. A man couldn’t commiserate with life to the full extent of his instincts and opportunities. A man had to accept his god-given limitations. (p. 19)

"Look How the Rich Live," in its determinist view of nature and the universe, presents a harshness that is more intense than any sense of evil conveyed by the melodramatic action of Flannery O'Connor's fiction. Powers, with low-keyed action and a technique that in contrast to the exaggerated, caricatured, and grotesque style of O'Connor is one of introspection and understatement, portrays intensity of evil without benefit of actual physical violence. Intrusion, awareness of evil, a sense of insufficiency in the face of extingency, a surrendering of notions of superiority, and an
identification with the common lot are elements common to the fiction of both Powers and O'Connor. The pattern is familiar. The treatment is varied.

"Blue Island" is one of only two secular stories in powers' second collection, The Presence of Grace, published in 1955. However, it is judged "superior to all the earlier secular stories...and...equal to the best of the religious stories...in that collection."38 The view of life in "Blue Island" is harsh and cruel. The intensity of evil is extreme in its implication though the event itself is small and unsensational.

An awareness of the presence of negative forces of selfishness and evil in human nature is brought about in "Blue Island," in typical Powers fashion, not by incidents of actual physical violence but by a violation of trust that has psychological implications far more hurtful in their effect. In the dimension of reality that

"Blue Island" portrays evil as a callous breach of good faith. In Powers' perspective, however, it is a lesson to the naive on the ways of the world.

Frank O'Connor describes "Blue Island," a story with no clerical background, as "a bitter little study of a lonely couple..." Contrasting it with "The presence of grace," the title story of the volume, in which healing grace flows to the human figures, he observes of "Blue Island:"

"the former is a good story but nothing in it relieves the pathos of the human tragedy." The darkness of this story is noted also by reviewer Donald Harr, who comments that in "Blue Island,... the terrors are the subtle terrors of gentility and the pity is for the precious and the spurious."

The main event of the plot in "Blue Island" is minor and everyday. The story centres on the efforts of a couple to gain acceptance into

a new neighbourhood. *Blue Island*, a suburb in
Minneapolis, is the area that Ralph Davioci, a
liquor dealer, and his bride Ethel choose to make
their home. Eager for the acceptance of their
middle-class neighbours, they fall a prey to the
sordid scheme of Mrs. Hancock, a saleswoman, who
under the pretense of arranging a coffee party
uses their home to hawk her wares.

The story begins with Ethel's first meeting
with Mrs. Hancock and the idea of the coffee
party to introduce the newcomers to their
neighbours. Ethel Davioci is a well-meaning,
good-hearted, dumb Swedish blonde who is cautious
by nature but unaware of the tactics of Mrs. Hancock.
Following a sales lead, Mrs. Hancock makes
introductory conversation with the newly-wed
housewife, who mistakes her selfish motivation
for disinterested concern and personal
friendliness. Mrs. Hancock gives the impression
that she is from the neighbourhood and raises
Ethel's confidence that she too will be able to
establish ties with her neighbours. "Am I right
in thinking you are of Swedish descent, Mrs.
Davicky? You, I mean?"41 asks Mrs. Hancock.

41 J.P. Powers, "Blue Island," Accent, 13 (autumn,
1925), 243. Subsequent references are
incorporated in the text.
who realizes that the ethnic origin of the couple is a factor in her favour. "I only ask because so many people in the neighbourhood are" (245). she continues, suggesting that Ethel Davisci will not have any problem in gaining the acceptance of those around her. The encounter ends with Mrs. Hancock cleverly succeeding in fixing arrangements for the "coffee party," leaving Ethel Davisci hopeful and eager to begin preparations for what she believes will be the couple's début on the neighbourhood.

Ralph Davisci, of Italian background, has renounced his ethnicity in his quest for social success. One a happy extrovert, he is now tense and anxious to conform to all-American social norms.

It just made Ethel sick to see him at the windows, watching Mr. Nilgren, a sandy-haired, dim-looking man who wore plaid shirts and a red cap in the yard. Mr. Nilgren would be faking out his hedge, or wiring up the skinny little trees, or washing his car if it was Sunday morning, and there Ralph would be, behind a drape. One warm day Ethel had seen Mr. Nilgren in the yard with a golf club, and had said, "We should get some of those little balls that don't go anywhere." It had been
painful to see Ralph then. She could almost hear him thinking. He would get some of those balls and give them to Mr. Milgren as a present. No, it would look funny if he did. Then he got that sick look that seemed to come from wanting to do a favor for someone who might not let him do it. (247)

In his eagerness to be well-dressed, Ralph is ostentatious. He reads Reader's Digest, plays golf, and forces his wife into a life for which she is not suited. Ralph Davioci's anxiety over preparations for the coming social affair forms the body of the story:

In the morning, Ralph checked over the silver and china laid out in the dining room and worried over the pastry. "Fresh?" fresh? She'd put it in the deep freeze right away and it hadn't been thawed out yet. "Is that all?" That was all, and it was more than enough. She certainly didn't need a whole quart of whipping cream. "Want me to call up for something to go with this?" No. "Turkey or a ham? I maybe got time to go myself if I go right now." He carried on like that until ten o'clock, when she got rid of him, saying, "You wouldn't want to be the only man, Ralph." (251)

The debacle of the coffee hour and its aftermath constitute the climax and denouement of "Blue Island." Mrs. Hancock has the neighbours all gathered together in the Davioci drawing-room,
a captive audience for her sales talk. The anxious preparations by Ethel are misdirected. While Mrs. Hancock indulges in her selfish sales interest, the neighbors are disgusted at being tricked thus into wasting a morning on Shipshape Household products.

Ethel glanced down at the pan, forgotten in her hand. "Pass it around," said Mrs. Hancock. Ethel offered the pan to Mrs. Nilgren, who was nearest. "I've seen it, thanks." Ethel moved to the next neighbor. "I've seen it." Ethel moved on. "Mrs. Wagner, have you?" "Many times" - with a smile. (253)

Ethel Davicci is broken with shame and disappointment:

Oh, God! In a minute, she'd have to get up and go down to them and do something...but then she heard the coat hangers banging back empty in the closet downstairs, and the front door opening and, finally, closing. There was a moment of perfect silence in the house before her sudden sob... (253)

The story concludes with the arrival of nervous Ralph Davicci who, in a final irony, enters as Mrs. Hancock is leaving: "Ethel heard Ralph come into the driveway. She got out of bed, straightened the spread, and concealed the pan in the closet. She went to the window and gazed down upon the
crown of his pearl grey hat. He was carrying a big club of roses." (254)

"Blue Island" illustrates that naïveté and innocence of the ways of the world lead only to victimization by meaner minds. Powers emphasizes the intensity of evil through an incident that is minor, even trivial. Using the familiar device of an intruding stranger, he builds up tension stressing the consciousness of Ralph Davicci and his young wife to make their party a success. The pathos of "Blue Island" is that evil, though underplayed, wins out in the end. The ladies at the coffee party do not recognize Ethel Davicci as, like themselves, victim to a callous scheme. They are only outraged at their own victimization.

"Blue Island" offers no escape from rude reality and ends, as J.P. Sisk observes, "in a kind of darkness that is unusual in Powers." Describing it as "written with a Joycean scrupulous meanness," Hagopian places the story in a literary perspective: "as a sociological

sick, critique, p. 36.
study of class disorientation and alienation, "Blue Island" is easily the equal of anything by, say, John O'Hara; but as a work of art it is far superior."

Powers' very first story, "Lions, Harts, Leaping Does" written in his middle twenties, is a masterpiece that probes the spiritual problems of an aged Franciscan friar. Brilliant in structural perfection, profound in character analysis and tenderly elegiac in its modulations of mood, it has been regarded as Powers' best work and "one of the finest stories ever written in this country." "Lions, Harts, Leaping Does" is illustrative of the creative genius of a young man. It not only is a rare work in itself, but anticipated for its author the fundamental formula and basic characterisation upon which he was to build his career as a fiction writer. None of Powers' later stories, however, which explore the problems of the priesthood achieve the maturity and compassion of this first story.

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43 Hagedorn, J.F. Powers, p. 56.

"Lions, Harts, Leaping Does" is not a "secular" story because it is clerical in characterization and deals with the problem of spiritual integrity in a servant of the Church. It, however, does not fall into the pattern of the rest of Powers' priest stories, standing unique as his only portrait of a cloistered priest. It follows the pattern in which the secular stories of both Powers and O'Connor are set, a pattern which employs intrusion, violation, awareness of evil, shedding of notions of superiority, and acceptance of a common humanity as rudimentary to the way into grace. "Lions, Harts, Leaping Does" is as representative of the short fiction of J.F. Powers as "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" is of that of Flannery O'Connor.

As extensively meditative piece, "Lions, Harts, Leaping Does" contains two movements to the action of its plot. The first leads to the shock of the death news that Didymus receives. The second consists of Didymus' anguished soul-searching as he confronts his own death and seeks spiritual resolution. The story opens in the cell of a Franciscan monastery, where
Brother Titus has been reading to aged Father Didymus from Bishop Hale's "Lives of the Popes." Father Didymus reflects upon his own lack of piety as they take a walk in the bitter cold. He regrets that he has been unable to visit his more aged brother, Seraphim, who has returned after twenty-five years in Rome.

On reaching the monastery, Didymus receives a telegram with news of his brother's death. Anguished in soul, the old man collapses. Brother Titus comforts him with readings from St. John of the Cross and presents him with a canary, "one of the saints' own birds." But after hours of agonized soul-searching, as the canary escapes into the snowy night, Didymus dies with no assurance of salvation.

Didymus' problem is a question of understanding the nature of evil and of finding a way into sanctity and grace. The spiritual process through which his mind is drawn involves a change from "trust in the certitude of intellect and rationality to a realization of the higher values of spirituality,
and from constant self-judgement to resignation. A hard-headed rationalist, intellectually
conceived Didymus must come to the point of
conceding the superior sanity of Brother Titus,
his mental inferior, before he can be granted
the grace that is not man's earning.

In his struggle for spiritual perfection,
Didymus must accept human limitations of time and
death. Only in resignation, in a final acceptance
of his own inability to do anything about his
salvation, does he become ready to receive the
grace that is from God. (Of his spiritual state
at the time of his death Naomi Lebowitz points
out: "Didymus does not attain a saintly, satisfying
peace on the verge of death. He has, however,
reached that condition of humor which distinguishes
powers' best characters. . . . The condition of humor,
in its demand for self-confession and the
acceptance of one's human status, is at the base
of powers' moral stand."

There is, in Didymus' refusal to meet his

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45 Hagopian, p. 70.
46 Naomi Lebowitz, "The Stories of J.F. Powers:
The Sign of the Contradiction," Kenyon Review,
20 (Summer, 1956), 499.
brother, a deep desire to fulfill the requirements of his vows to perfection:

No, he had written back, it's simply impossible - not saying why. God help him as a natural man, he had an inordinate desire to see his brother again. One of them must die soon. But as a friar, he remembered from Vitus: "Unless a man be clearly delivered from the love of all creatures, he may not fully tend to his creator."

Therein, the keeping of the vows having become an easy habit for him, was his opportunity. It was plain and there was sacrifice and it was hard. And he had not gone. 47

and yet, there is a trace of pride, in Didymus' sense of perfection. From a human angle, such stringency is quite unnecessary:

"It was impossible for me to visit him."
"But if he were in this country, Didymus..."
The Rector waited for Didymus to explain.

Didymus opened his mouth to speak, heard the clock in the tower sound the quarter-hour, and said nothing, listening, lips parted, to the last of the three strokes die away.

"Why Didymus, it could easily have been arranged," the Rector persisted. 18

A surrendering of false notions of superiority and an acceptance of common human frailty is, again,

the basis for the achievement of grace in this story. The telegram which conveys the death news of Didymus' brother is that external agent, the rude intrusion into the restful cloistered world of the old friar, which rouses the troubled thought processes in him, leading him toward grace and culminating in his death.

Fraught with images and abounding in symbols, "Lions, Harts, Leaping Does" has been described as "a thematic Poema, Grayfish, Leaping canaries." The internal conflict in Didymus swings wildly between forces of order and disorder and his response to external events and objects is a projection of this inner battle. The tension in the story is extreme and intense. The forces are, again, not violent in any physical sense, but the strain of the psychological conflict and mental agony in Didymus, reflected in the harsh natural symbols and landscape imagery, exceeds any possible physical pain. Of Didymus' tortured rationalizations, Seuffert comments:

The nature of the preoccupation of Didymus, schooled all his life in the

minute contemplation of theological and mystical problems and disciplines, inevitably leads to a hall-of-mirrors effect in the development of his conflict, with each mirror reflecting the obverse of the image in its opposite. Almost every act, every motive, every thought and conclusion inevitably creates its own counter. Every element in the story supports this effect, in a remarkable fusion of suspension of diversities. Didymus' dream, brought on by his sorrow over the death of his brother, Seraphin, and remorse for his own neglect through false humility and inverted spiritual pride, is an elaborate mythic experience in nature. The images are of a hierarchy of sea creatures, fish, crustaceae, and crayfish, which suggest that Didymus has voluntarily immersed himself in the teeming disorder of nature. In the moment before his death, at the end of his dream, Scouffas points out, Didymus realizes his corporeality which relates him to all creatures. "Human love was all he was fitted for." The final moments are given lyrical expression. As Titus switches off the light, Didymus "saw the full moon had set down

Scouffas, Critique, 45.
a ladder of light through the window." (28).

Clarity, serenity, and coolness replaces the earlier feverish brightness of vision; "with an
eye and mind so sensitive...he could count
the snowflakes, all of them separately." (28).

The final image is of release. The canary,
synonymous with absolute freedom and death, flies
out to certain death in the snow. The moment is
symbolic for it is the moment of Didymus' own
release: "How long would it be...before Titus
ungrievingly gave up the canary for lost in the
snowy arms of God?" (29).

Of the outcome of Didymus' spiritual struggles
most critics are skeptical. However, Didymus'
confusion and the fact that he dies without
assurance of salvation is not an indication of
his lostness. As Brother Charles Padilla points
out, there is every possibility that in resignation
and relinquishing the struggle for spiritual
perfection, Didymus found the grace he sought;
"Sanctity is not only man's work, but God's also.
The story truly reflects the contradictory ways
of man and the hidden ways of God."50

50 Brother Charles V. Padilla, The Art of Short
Fiction in J. F. Powers (Mexico City, 1963),
p. 78.
The sixteenth century theological system of
the Spanish mystic, St. John of the Cross,
contained in the story itself, provides an
objective measure of the state of Didymus' soul.
St. John's "Cantico Espiritual," read aloud by
Titus to the dying priest, is a spiritual tenet
which, applied to the story "determines that
Didymus' soul despite Didymus' own conclusion, is
not in peril, but somewhere on the way to glory."
Mindful that Didymus, like his apostolic counterpart,
Thomas the doubter, demonstrates the struggles
of the rational man attempting to rely on faith,
Arlene Schnier suggests that perhaps Didymus is not
the best judge of his own spiritual state. He has
had illusions of the moral and spiritual unity
achieved by Brother Titus. Moreover, "St. John's
system reminds the reader that the road to God
is veiled in mystery and the psychological
reactions of the soul while travelling the road
are paradoxical."[2]

51 Arlene Schnier, "How to Recognize Heaven When
you see it; The Theology of St. John of the
Cross in J.F. Powers' 'Lions, Bats, Leaping
Mice'," Studies in Short Fiction, 14 (Spring,
1977), 150.

52 Ibid., p. 164.
These stories of Powers and O'Connor follow a similar narrative pattern with variations in treatment and style that suit the individual artist. Common structural and thematic parallels illustrate the working of grace through a system of shock and violence, and by means of an intrusion of evil into seemingly secure circumstances. While Flannery O'Connor is overtly violent in her strategy and shocks the reader as she does her protagonist into awareness of evil by means of brutality, Powers follows a style suited to a quieter temperament.

Powers' fiction, which exploits a tension and violation that is psychological and spiritual rather than material and physical, is no less harsh than that of Flannery O'Connor. On the contrary, the deceptiveness of Powers' technique, itself accentuates the effect of the intensity of evil upon the unsuspecting protagonist who is not provided with premonitions and buffers to shock that are made available in the fiction of Flannery O'Connor. Because Powers adopts a quiet fictional strategy, the harshness and nihilism of
his stories are difficult to accept.

In the stories of Flannery O'Connor, grace is everywhere present. In spite of the outrageous acts of physical violence and assault that fill her stories, "in no story is this opportunity for restoration, with its terrifying price, absent." The grandmother, Mrs. Cope, even Hulga Hopewell all either experience or are prepared, by violent circumstances, to experience redemptive grace in their lives. In Powers, however, in these stories, at least, there is no offer of release from the bitterness of life and no relief from the darkness of evil in man and nature. "Blue Island" is expressive of the evils that counter naivété, "Look How the Fish Live" does not afford any change in the natural order. Even "Lions, Harts, Leaping Doe," with its deeply spiritual theme, has only tentative answers to the vital question of the fate of a searching soul. In Powers and O'Connor, grace through violence illustrates a major fictional

strategy. Their protagonists, drawn into the fold of grace, find that the means of their salvation is not compelling gentleness but forceful violence and drastic violations.