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Flannery O'Connor and the Development of the Grotesque in American Literature

Joan Rae Griffin

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FLANNERY O'CONNOR AND THE DEVELOPMENT
OF THE GROTESQUE IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

BY

JOAN RAE GRIFFIN

A thesis submitted
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree Master of Arts, Major in
English, South Dakota
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This thesis is approved as a creditable and independent investigation by a candidate for the degree, Master of Arts, and is acceptable as meeting the thesis requirements for this degree. Acceptance of this thesis does not imply that the conclusions reached by the candidate are necessarily the conclusions of the major department.

Thesis Adviser  Date

Head, Department of English  Date
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INTRODUCTION

When man's view of himself as a being in his universe changes with the tide of events, literary conventions change as well. There is very little in contemporary life that would contradict the assumption that man's view of himself and of his world is no longer governed by the assurance of reason or the confidence of prediction. When certainty of man's place in the universe was commonly accepted, for instance in the eighteenth-century, this assurance was reflected in a literature which was essentially rational and ordered. In the last two centuries, drastic upheavals in the course of human events have shaken, even shattered, the certainties of human existence; modern life seems characterized by the irrational and the violent. Today, it is not uncommon to feel certainty only in uncertainty, as paradoxical as that may appear. Modern literature has not escaped the effects of the apparent disintegration of any reasonable and fundamental world view. In the works of many modern writers, including the subject of this thesis, Flannery O'Connor, the impact of this change upon the artist is readily discernible in a marked preference for the use of the grotesque as a literary technique.

Because of her limited literary output in her short life span, Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964) may never be ranked among the major Southern writers; she did, however, in her even shorter writing span, create a great deal of interest and puzzlement among her readers and critics. Perhaps it is only with the important "minor" figures in American literature that Miss O'Connor will be finally
ranked, if such ranking is significant at all. What is important in Flannery O'Connor is her awareness of the ugly, the perverse, and the bizarre in human life and the force with which she has imprinted her vision on American literature and its literary consciousness through the use of the grotesque.

Mary Flannery O'Connor was born in Savannah, Georgia, on March 25, 1925. She was the only child of Regina L. Cline and Edward F. O'Connor, Jr., two old Georgia, Catholic families. In 1938, the O'Connors moved to Milledgeville, Georgia, where Miss O'Connor later did most of her writing. Her advanced education included a B.A. degree in English and the Social Sciences from Georgia State College for Women in 1945 and the M.F.A. degree in Literature from the University of Iowa in 1947. It was before entering the University of Iowa that she dropped "Mary" from her name, feeling that a double name would be an anomaly in the Midwest. ¹

Miss O'Connor began writing stories during her years at Georgia State College for Women. One of her English teachers there submitted some of her stories to the Writer's Workshop of the University of Iowa, and she was awarded a Rinehart Fellowship at the Workshop. At Iowa City, she continued writing and sending out stories. Her first published story, "The Geranium," appeared

in Accent in the summer of 1946 and was followed with some regularity by other stories in Mademoiselle, Harper's Bazaar, Sewanee Review, Critic, Esquire, and Partisan Review.²

Late in 1950, when Miss O'Connor was completing her first novel, Wise Blood, and living with Robert Fitzgerald (now her literary executor) and his family in Ridgefield, Connecticut, she experienced the first symptoms of disseminated lupus, the disease which would eventually take her life in 1964. As soon as she was able to travel, she left the Fitzgeralds in Connecticut and returned to Milledgeville. From 1955 onwards she was forced to use crutches because of a serious weakening of her bone structure, an effect of the disease and of her medicine, ACTH, a cortisone derivative. Despite her poor health, Flannery O'Connor continued to write and to accept invitations to lecture and read from her works at various colleges and universities where her work "was being read, discussed, and criticized with increasing seriousness."³ Wise Blood was published in 1952; a collection of stories, A Good Man Is Hard to Find, appeared in 1955; a second novel, The Violent Bear It Away, in 1960.

Early in 1964, while she was at work on an untitled third novel, Flannery O'Connor was told that she had to have an abdominal operation. The aftermath caused the lupus disease to return in

²Stanley Edgar Hyman, Flannery O'Connor, University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers, No. 54 (Minneapolis, 1966), pp. 5-7.
³Drake, p. 10.
full force. Told that her chances for recovering were almost non-existent, she spent her last months trying to finish enough stories for a new book. Flannery O'Connor died in Milledgeville, at the age of thirty-nine, on August 3, 1964. Everything That Rises Must Converge, a collection of stories, appeared posthumously in 1965. The untitled third novel was never completed; however, a fragment was published in 1963 under the title, "Why Do Heathens Rage?"

During her short lifetime, Flannery O'Connor was the recipient of a number of literary awards and honors. She received a Kenyon Review Fellowship in Fiction in 1953, and a renewal of it in 1954; a grant from the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1957, and a grant from the Ford Foundation in 1959. Her stories won the O. Henry first prizes in 1957, 1963, and 1964. In 1962 she received an honorary D. Litt. from St. Mary's College, Notre Dame; in 1963 a similar degree was awarded to her from Smith College.

Her fiction has a wildness and unbalance about it that met "a chorus of praise and misunderstanding by some reviewers, outrage and misunderstanding by others." She failed to please only the most ultra-conservative Catholics who found her brand of Catholicism not orthodox enough and the most "textual" critics who found her language too bare and her experiments with structure not eccentric enough. The reviews of her first three volumes, Wise Blood, A Good Man Is Hard to Find, and The Violent Bear It Away, were generally

4Hyman, p. 8.
5Ibid., p. 7.
favorable with such distinguished critics as Granville Hicks, Caroline Gordon, Louis D. Rubin, and R. W. B. Lewis passing sympathetic judgment. John Crowe Ransom once remarked that Flannery O'Connor was one of the few tragic writers of our time.

Criticism of Flannery O'Connor's fiction has increased in both volume and seriousness since her death in 1964. Nevertheless, her work has continued to be disturbing to even the best-intentioned of her critics. She is thoroughly traditional in her insistence upon a return to Christian orthodoxy; she is thoroughly modern in her method or media, the grotesque. The purpose of this study is two-fold: to examine the development of the grotesque in American literature from its early and restricted usage to its pervasive and prevalent usage in modern literature, and to examine the nature and function of the grotesque in selected works of Flannery O'Connor.

The definition of the grotesque and its significance in modern literature is discussed in Chapter I. Chapter II deals with the development of the grotesque in American literature. Chapter III examines Flannery O'Connor's theory of the grotesque and her concept of the Christian writer's role in the modern world. Chapter IV is a discussion of the nature and function of the grotesque in selected fiction of Flannery O'Connor.


The survey of the development and the use of the grotesque in American literature is needed less to establish precedents for the technique, than to point out similarities and differences between the earlier theories and uses of the grotesque and its use in the fiction of Flannery O'Connor. The task of surveying the grotesque is indeed prodigious, for to be valuable, such a study would include a thorough-going analysis of the grotesque as it influences theme, character, setting, action, and reader reaction. No definitive study of the development of the grotesque as a separate genre in American literature exists. Therefore, the interested student must search out relevant statements of individual authors as they appear in prefaces and other critical writings in addition to pondering how the grotesque functions in a particular work itself in order to arrive at any conclusions concerning the grotesque as a distinct literary phenomenon.

The strengths of Flannery O'Connor's writings are those qualities that have incited the most dislike and attack: the apocalyptic violence, the grotesque vision, the vulgarity. Her fictional world stands ready to explode in violence and outrage, in fact does explode in murders, burnings, blindings, and other shocking human indignities. It is a world in which the "violent do bear it away," and a "good man is hard to find." Her vision is a vision of a desperate Christianity which has been thrown off balance and is no longer quiet about its desperation; her method is the shocking and disturbing use of the grotesque.
I

In mid-twentieth century America, man's image of himself reflects his lack of confidence in either his reason or his significance. Man's vision of the real has been blurred because the value his humanity has been reduced to absurdity. That this is apparent modern literature many critics have noted. "The grotesque," William Van O'Connor writes, "has developed in response to our age, atom bombs and great social changes." Richard Chase refers to modern literature as the "profound poetry of disorder"; and W. M. Frohock views the modern novel as "the novel of violence." Given disorders in the contemporary scene, it is not surprising that many writers are preoccupied with the irrational, the unpretentious, the distorted, in a word, the grotesque.

Earlier in this century, Thomas Mann anticipated the direction the literature of the Western world was taking and the reason it when he wrote:

I feel that, broadly and essentially, the striking feature of modern art is that it has ceased to recognize the categories of tragic and comic, or the dramatic classifications, tragedy and comedy. It sees life as tragi-comedy, with the result that the grotesque is its most genuine style—to the extent, indeed, that today that is the only guise in which the sublime may


10W. M. Frohock, The Novel of Violence in America (Dallas, 1957).
appear. For, if I may say so, the grotesque is the genuine anti-bourgeois; and however bourgeois Anglo-Saxondom may otherwise be or appear, it is a fact that in art the comic-grotesque has always been its strong point.\(^\text{11}\)

Although Mann does not cite specific works to substantiate his argument, he does point out several things that are pertinent to this study of the grotesque and Flannery O'Connor: that the distinction between comedy and tragedy has been blurred; that the sublime can be communicated through distortion; and that the literature of the grotesque is, in one sense at least, protest literature.

In *The Grotesque: An American Genre*, William Van O'Connor provides further explanation for Mann's thesis by bringing Mann's notions to bear on American literature and life. "American literature," he writes, "is filled with the grotesque, more so probably than any other Western literature. It is a new genre, merging tragedy and comedy, and seeking, seemingly in perverse ways, the sublime."\(^\text{12}\) O'Connor argues that man is no longer able to feel any intimate moral kinship with the universe, nor any certainty about the nature of rationality, codes, or fixed social orders. Without an affirmation of a moral universe, tragedy is impossible; without an affirmation of human rationality and a fixed social order, comedy is impossible. Consequently, modern writers have turned to distortion and to the grotesque because life itself has become grotesque.


\(^{\text{12}}\) *The Grotesque: An American Genre*, p. 3.
Wolfgang Kayser, in an ambitious volume entitled The Grotesque in Art and Literature, deduces that the grotesque is a logical artistic expression of the estrangement and alienation which grips mankind when belief in a perfect and protective natural order is weakened. It is logical only in its inevitability. Kayser's contribution to the modern philosophy of the grotesque resides primarily in his insistence that the "grotesque is not concerned with individual actions or destruction of the moral order. Rather, it is primarily the expression of our failure to orient ourselves in the physical universe."\(^\text{13}\)

Even this brief preliminary survey supplies an indication of the complexity involved in discussing the use of the grotesque as a literary genre or convention.

Some suggestion of the meaning of the "grotesque" as a literary convention can be derived from the etymology of the word and its earlier application to other art forms. It is derived from the Italian "la grottesca" and "grottesco" which refer to "grotta" (cave). These words were coined to designate a certain ornamental style which was discovered during late fifteenth-century excavations, first in Rome and then in other parts of Italy as well, and which turned out to constitute a previously unknown ancient form of ornamental painting. During the Renaissance the word "grottesco" was used to designate the gay and fantastic style suggested by the

\(^{13}\) The Grotesque in Art and Literature, trans. Ulrich Weisstein (Bloomington, 1963), p. 185.
findings of antiquity. At that time, the word also began to suggest the ominous and sinister. An entry in the Dictionary of the French Academy (1694) defined "grotesque" as signifying the "silly, bizarre, and extravagant," as well as the "distorted and caricatural." By the eighteenth century, the word "grotesque" was no longer restricted in use to a style of painting or architecture, but was extended to include a specific literary style characterized by distortion and exaggeration. 14

The French form "grotesque" was adopted into English about 1640. The Oxford English Dictionary provides a complete definition of the word, indicating the evolution in meaning from the original Italian usage:

N. A kind of decorative painting or sculpture, consisting of representations of portions of human and animal forms, fantastically combined and interwoven with foliage and flowers.

A work of art in this style. In popular language, figures or designs characterized by comic distortion or exaggeration.

Adj. In a wider sense, of designs or forms characterized by distortion or unnatural combinations; fantastically extravagant, bizarre, quaint. Also transferred to immaterial things, especially of literary style.

Of landscape: Romantic, picturesquely irregular; ludicrous from incongruity; fantastically absurd. 15

The Century Dictionary, the American version of the OED, substantially concurs with the English definition: "whimsical, extravagant, or odd; absurdly bold; often, or more commonly, used

14 Kayser, pp. 19, 21, 26.

15 OED, IV (1933), 449.
in a sense of condemnation or depreciation."\textsuperscript{16}

Of course, dictionary definitions of "grotesque," even though useful as a starting point, inevitably prove to be inadequate in a literary analysis. Any final categorizing or defining of the grotesque in American literature ultimately depends upon discovering, as far as possible, what its function is in a particular work and what effects it achieves. Kayser, who calls the grotesque an "esthetic category," maintains that there are three areas which must be examined in order to understand the nature of the grotesque in a work of art: certain attitudes of the author at work in the creative process; the contents and structure of the work of art itself; and the reception and effect of the work upon the reader.\textsuperscript{17}

Essentially, the controlling framework for the following chapters is an adherence to an examination of the three areas which Kayser presents as the substance of the grotesque as an artistic category. Both in the survey of the development of the use of the grotesque in American literature and in the examination of Flannery O'Connor's fiction, these pertinent questions will be asked: Why does the author use the grotesque? How does the grotesque function in a particular work? What are the effects on the reader?

\textsuperscript{16}The Century Dictionary, IV (1889), 2633.
\textsuperscript{17}Kayser, p. 180.
There is inherent in the grotesque a strong element of exaggeration. Sometimes this is used to connote ludicrous awkwardness or incongruity with overtones of comedy and the burlesque; other times it is used to suggest the sinister and tragic. Nineteenth-century American writers of the grotesque, for the most part, tended to respect this division between the grotesque for comic purposes and the grotesque for tragic purposes. Modern writers of the grotesque tend to disregard this distinction.

In American literature, the development of the grotesque has been a later manifestation of the Gothic in literature. It is not surprising, for Gothic literature provides a natural framework for the grotesque of sinister and tragic overtones. In fact, with the exception of Sherwood Anderson, most twentieth-century writers of the grotesque, Flannery O'Connor included, have chosen to work within a framework which is still essentially Gothic.

The first American Gothic novelist was Charles Brockden Brown (1771-1810). In Wieland, Ormund, and even more so in Edgar Huntly, Brown achieved the gothic tone of horror, surprise, victimization, and psychological abnormality. Of course, Brown was obviously writing in the English Gothic tradition of the 18th century which had been firmly established in the works of Horace Walpole and Ann Radcliffe and which had as its intention the titillation of the reader's emotions of fear, terror, and sometimes horror. Such

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Chase, p. 36.
thorough-going Gothic works as *The Castle of Otranto* and *The Mysteries of Udolpho* were usually set in "medieval castles complete with secret passageways, mysterious dungeons, peripatetic ghosts, and much gloom and supernatural paraphernalia, and were thrillers designed to evoke genteel shudders."\(^{19}\)

It is generally agreed that Brown's concern for the Gothic involved little more than a concerted effort to prove that the genre could survive when cast in an American setting. The grotesque, when it appeared in his works, was little more than an ornamental device intended to further titillate the reader's emotions. The character Carwin or the use of natural phenomena or ventriloquism in *Wieland* are examples of this. "For better or worse," writes Leslie Fiedler, "Brown did establish in the American novel a tradition of dealing with the exaggerated and the grotesque, not as they are verifiable in any external landscape or sociological observation of manners and men, but as they correspond in quality to our deepest fears and guilts as projected in our dreams or lived through in 'extreme situations.'"\(^{20}\)

It is in the later stages of Gothic literature, particularly the American phase, that the grotesque began to assume symbolic significance reaching far beyond mere ornamentation. The characteristic use of violence, desolation, and decay evident in Gothic


writing began to move in Poe's work from the simple design of evoking "genteel shudders" toward a complex purpose of symbolizing a world, private or public, which was essentially disordered and distorted. As man's view of himself and of his world became increasingly more irrational and unpredictable, "Gothic" literature was no longer the "mere thriller" but a distorted, that is, a grotesque view of the Universe. Where the Gothic had been mere ornamentation, the grotesque was the substance of the literary work itself.

The grotesque as concerned with the estranged world makes itself felt with great horror in the works of Poe, one of the early practitioners of the form. Poe called the first collection of twenty-five of his stories Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque (1840), and in the preface to that edition remarked that "... the epithets 'Grotesque' and 'Arabesque' will be found to indicate with sufficient precision the prevalent tenor of the tales here published."\(^1\) Included in the volume were some of Poe's finest "Gothic-grotesque" works: "The Pit and the Pendulum," "A Descent into the Maelstrom," "The Black Cat," "The Cask of Amontillado," and others. "The Masque of the Red Death" (1842) records Poe's further entrance into the world of the grotesque. In another tale, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," (1841) he described the appearance of the room in which the double murder had taken place as "a grotesquerie in horror absolutely alien from humanity."\(^2\)

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\(^1\) Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque (Philadelphia, 1840), p. ii.

Quite specifically, Poe used the word "grotesque" on two different levels: to indicate the tenor of entire stories concerned with the incomprehensible, the terrible, and the bizarre, and to describe a concrete situation in which chaos prevailed. Generally, there is little in Poe which does not reveal his marked preference for the repulsive and the horrible as literary subject matter.

It is apparent that Poe wrote tales of Gothic and grotesque horror for reasons quite different from those of Charles Brockden Brown. The world of Poe's Gothic fiction is a world shrouded in darkness and threatening disaster, haunted, malevolent, and decayed. His decaying castles, slimy tarns, and beautiful but dead women are more than grotesque projections of a sick mind: they are a version of the world, Poe's version. This awareness in Poe's fiction of the world as madness finds loud echoes in a great deal of twentieth-century literature and links him quite closely to the writers of the modern grotesque.

From the distorted and disordered nightmarish world of Poe, the Gothic tradition was continued in representative works of Nathaniel Hawthorne. In his efforts to establish "the Romance" as a respectable American genre, Hawthorne frequently borrowed Gothic elements. Of his longer works, The House of the Seven Gables and

23 Kayser, pp. 78-79.

The Marble Faun are the most thoroughly Gothic in setting, character, and plot. But his purposes were also different from traditional Gothic.

In The House of Seven Gables there are numerous examples of Gothic influence: the seventeenth-century house decayed by the prevailing east wind and, of course, the family curse; the old spinster Hepzibah Pyncheon, the embodiment of decayed gentility; Matthew Maule's bloody curse upon the Pyncheon family; Clifford Pyncheon, the "abortive lover of the beautiful," who has been nearly broken by his long imprisonment for the supposed murder of his uncle who, in fact, had died of an apoplectic seizure, the traditional Pyncheon disease; Holgrave, the sole lodger in the old house, whose hatred of the dead burden of the past is not fully understood until he reveals himself as a descendant of the Maules. All in all, The House of Seven Gables stands out as a fine piece of evidence "that Hawthorne could conceive evil in the world, but not an evil world." His use of Gothic elements is for the moral symbols they become.

In the preface to The Marble Faun, Hawthorne wrote: "No author, without a trial, can conceive of the difficulty of writing a romance about a country where there is no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong, nor anything but a commonplace prosperity, in broad and simple daylight, as is happily

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the case with my dear native land." He resolved the "difficulty" of a past-impoverished America by setting the romance in Italy, just as Poe used this setting before him, and Horace Walpole and Mrs. Radcliffe did before Poe. Where Italy provided Hawthorne with "shadow" and "antiquity," Miriam provides the reader with "mystery" and "gloomy wrong" by the mysterious scandal which binds her to the sinister palace.

There is a sense of gloom and mystery in many of Hawthorne's shorter tales as well, notably "The Minister's Black Veil," "Young Goodman Brown," "Ethan Brand," and "Rappaccini's Daughter," where the notion of sin and its effects on the individual as well as the notion of science as suspicious and sinister are recurring themes. The Gothic techniques in these tales reinforce Hawthorne's fixation on a world that is not seen and that heightens man's sense of alienation from a moral, rational order.

Although Poe and Hawthorne are both in the American Gothic tradition, Hawthorne is more unlike than like Poe. In Poe, the sense of terror and fear rises out of the isolation of the alienated, tortured soul which is, in most cases, Poe's own psyche. Distortion in Poe is the distortion of a mad man attempting to get out of time and space; he uses the grotesque as a means to destroy time and space. In Hawthorne, there is the consciousness of a moral world

and of universal sinfulness. His reality includes both an ordered world and a brotherhood of the sinful in that world. Gothic elements in Hawthorne serve to reinforce a disorder which is at heart a moral disorder. He broods over a real Past, traces the guilt of family curses, and is suspicious of the mind and the "new" science with much more objectivity than Poe because he does accept their reality. In this respect, his contribution to the grotesque is less meaningful.

The interests of the Realists as writers were essentially antithetical to those of the grotesque and Gothic. After the Civil War, in the work of the local colorists, the realists, and the naturalists, there appeared a growing pre-occupation with an accurate, faithful representation of life in contrast to the obscure, shadowy world of the Gothic or the distorted world of the grotesque. Most realistic writers remained outside the Gothic tradition entirely. They concentrated upon man in his natural or social dimensions.

Such a writer as Henry James does seem to relate to the Gothic tradition in such works as _The Turn of the Screw_ with its dependence on terror and sinister setting. In _The Turn of the Screw_ the reader's interest is focused on a distorted mind; the story itself seems more nearly related to a study in abnormal psychology than to Hawthorne's evil heart or Poe's distorted world. In the preface to _The Turn of the Screw_, James wrote: "Only make the reader's general vision of evil intense enough...and his own experience,
his own imagination, his own sympathy and horror will supply him quite sufficiently with all the particulars. Make him think the evil, make him think it for himself, and you are released from weak specifications." \(^{27}\)

However, James is as much the master craftsman experimenting with point of view and "central consciousness" as he is the Gothic writer reveling in horror and mystery for their own sake. James spoke of the novel as a "piece of cold artistic calculation" deliberately planned "to catch those not easily caught." \(^{28}\) James's strategy is to raise irresolvable doubts about the reliability of the governess as narrator.

Even though James admits to playing games with the reader, an idea alien to the earlier Gothic writers, he still deserves attention for his Gothic achievements. The horrors in The Turn of the Screw, intensified because they arise from the sick mind of the governess, drive one child to death and the other to hopeless distraction.

In the fiction of Brown, Poe, Hawthorne, and James, then, the dark-turned-sinister grotesque moves from mere thrill-seeking to the horror of psychological distortion. But this is only half the story. The use of the grotesque for comic purposes developed in another tradition of American literature.

\(^{27}\)The Turn of the Screw (New York, 1936), p. xxi-xxii.

\(^{28}\)Ibid., p. xvi.
In the works of the Southwestern humorists, Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, and Sherwood Anderson, the lighter side of the grotesque moves from humor and burlesque to social satire. When exaggeration is used by the author for purposes of humor, caricature is often the result. The Southwestern humorists certainly recognize the humorous possibilities of exaggeration in their tall tales. George Washington Harris' Sut Lovingood is one of the better examples of exaggerative "frontier" humor.

In Huckleberry Finn, Twain develops humorous grotesquerie to a high art. The "Duke" and the "Dauphin" show Twain at his best in caricature-creating for purposes of burlesque. "I am the rightful Duke of Bridgewater," announces the one, "and here I am... ragged, worn, and degraded." To which his partner adds, "Bilgewater, I am the late Dauphin." But it does not take Huck long to make up his mind that "these liars warn't no kings nor dukes at all, but just low-down humbugs and frauds." However, coupled with this humorous side of Twainian grotesquerie were definite satiric overtones which would eventually dominate his later works.

Stephen Crane and others in contemporary literature have occasionally used the grotesque for social satire. In "The Monster," Crane inveighs against a whole town because they cannot face the responsibility of accepting a monstrous hero, the Negro Johnson, who has been rendered faceless and mindless in his heroism during a fire.

Johnson's burns turn him into a grotesque figure naturally; the townspeople's inhuman treatment of Johnson twists and turns them into even greater grotesques unnaturally. Crane uses the distorted humanity of Johnson to satirically underline the more monstrous inhumanity of a small town who have failed the test of manhood.

In the twentieth-century, the grotesque in fiction came into its own as a genre chiefly through the work of Sherwood Anderson. In the preface to *Winesburg, Ohio*, appropriately called "The Book of the Grotesque," Anderson spoke of a writer, an old man, who held a theory about grotesques:

That in the beginning when the world was young there were a great many thoughts but no such thing as a truth. Man made the truths himself and each truth was a composite of a great many vague thoughts....

There was the truth of virginity and the truth of passion, the truth of wealth and of poverty, of thrift and profligacy, of carelessness and abandon....

And then the people came along. Each as he appeared snatched up one of the truths and some who were quite strong snatched up a dozen of them.

It was the truths that made the people grotesque. The old man had quite an elaborate theory concerning the matter. It was his notion that the moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood.\(^{30}\)

Actually, what Sherwood Anderson did in *Winesburg, Ohio* was to suggest that his "grotesques," because they once had sought "the truths" and once had experienced life very deeply, are one level

\(^{30}\)*Winesburg, Ohio* (New York, 1963), pp. 24-25.
above the "respectable" citizens of Winesburg who are not even grotesques, but unfeeling and banal creatures. If the backstreet grotesques are figures of pathos and estrangement because of aborted love and feeling, the townspeople are even more pathetic because of their inability to respond to the estranged. One critic has commented that in Winesburg, Ohio, "the grotesques rot because they are unused, their energies deprived of outlet, and their instincts curdled in isolation."31

Anderson does not rely upon physical distortion of external appearances in his theory and use of the grotesque. Attempting to cut below the surface of objective knowledge, Anderson uses his own intuition to try to find what it is in the lives of his grotesques that has prevented them from reaching their full human potential and why it is they have been cut off from the rest of society:

He shows...his realization that the cause is not something as easily perceived and denounced as modern industrialism but it is as old as the human race. False ideas, false dreams, false hopes, and false goals have distorted man's vision almost from the beginning. Anderson is attempting in the stories to approach these people who have had such indignities inflicted upon them as to become spiritual grotesques, and most importantly, he is attempting to understand them as people rather than as curious specimens of spiritual deformity.32

From the 1930's to the present, the greater portion of grotesque literature has been the work of a new school of Southern


writers called the "new Southern Gothics," writers who are pre-occupied with natural distortions as opposed to the earlier Gothic writers who were pre-occupied with supernatural paraphernalia. Irving Malin has observed that these writers are aptly designated "new Southern Gothics" because he feels that they have taken over the important elements of the tradition but have radically internalized them. In his view, the haunted castle has become a character haunted and twisted by narcissism (for these writers, the distorting force in their characters' lives); the journey into the dark forest has become the dark journey within; the reflection has become the hopelessly distorted and limited view of those characters who look out at the world but see only their own grotesque reflection thrown back. 33

Why has the grotesque been so deeply entrenched in the works of Southern writers? There are two obvious reasons: worn-out land produces poverty and poverty breeds abnormality; a worn-out life code produces detachment and detachment breeds unreality. The combination of abnormality and unreality distorts and twists the lives of those involved. Grotesques haunt contemporary Southern literature just as, in fact, they haunt contemporary Southern life. There is also a third reason: William Faulkner. Few would deny the overpowering influence he has had on Southern literature. "That the South has remained through the last three decades our preferred literary arena

of terror," writes Leslie Fiedler, "is, in a great part, the achievement of Faulkner, a product of his mythopoeic genius." 34

The Gothic, grotesque, and violent are everywhere present in Faulkner. Yoknapatawpha County, the fictional recreation of his own county where Oxford, Mississippi, is located, provided a ready-made Gothic landscape:

In Oxford one could know gloom and terror. There was the gloom that had settled over a defeated people, and there was the terror of sudden violences, most frequently violence between white and black. There was the old jail, the courthouse, and a few ante-bellum houses. For Faulkner all of this had held the same sort of interest that the Charter St. Burial Ground, Gallows Hill, and the Custom House held for Hawthorne. 35

Faulkner's great subject is a combination of the Southern memory, the Southern reality, and the Southern myth. It is the testing and often exploding of these three elements in Yoknapatawpha County which provide the tension and horror in Faulkner's fiction. 36 The reality of rootlessness in the inhuman present constantly clashes with the Southern myth and memory, the decadent past, in the lives of his characters. The tragi-comic world of the grotesque casts a long shadow in such works as Absalom, Absalom, The Sound and the Fury, As I Lay Dying, Light in August, and Sanctuary.

In a curious way, Faulkner, in such stories as "Spotted Horses" or "The Reivers," combines the two principal strains of the grotesque

34. Love and Death in the American Novel, p. 480.


in American literature: the tradition of the sinister, tragic and psychologically distorted that began with Brown and extended through Poe, Hawthorne, and James; and the other tradition of frontier humor and satire having Twain and Anderson as its best examples. "But the American author he most resembles," writes Malcolm Cowley," is Hawthorne, for all their polar differences, Hawthorne had much the same attitude toward New England that Faulkner has toward the South, together with a strong sense of regional particularity."37

Succeeding Southern novelists have discovered an example in Faulkner's Gothicism and use of the grotesque. One line of development is seen in the novels of Robert Penn Warren, World Enough and Time and All the King's Men, and in such novels of Erskine Caldwell as Tobacco Road and God's Little Acre. "Caldwell," observes Fiedler," has deliberately vulgarized his themes, exaggerating the grotesquerie of Faulkner in the direction of the merely shocking, and creating a special brand of horror-pornography." Warren is more concerned with "the complex moral and social problems of the South."38

A second Faulknerian line of descent mainly consists of women: Katherine Anne Porter, Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, Truman Capote, and Flannery O'Connor. In their works,"...the obsessive concerns of Faulkner, and especially his vision of the South as a

38Love and Death in the American Novel, p. 481.
world of Gothic terror disguised as historical fact, ceases to be the property of a single author and becomes a living tradition. Against a background of miasmic swamps and sweating black skins, the Faulknerian syndrome of disease, death, mutilation, idiocy, and lust continues to evoke a shudder once compelled only by the supernatural.\textsuperscript{39} The visionary fiction of Flannery O'Connor has been no exception.

\textsuperscript{39}Fiedler, p. 481.
Flannery O'Connor never welcomed the role of literary critic. Once, while participating in a symposium on Southern fiction, she remarked:

I think that if there is any value in hearing authors talk, it will be in hearing what they can witness to, and not what they can theorize about. My own approach to literary problems is very much like the one Dr. Johnson's blind housekeeper used when she poured tea: she put her finger inside the cup....The writer has no rights at all, except those he forges for himself inside his own work.40

Miss O'Connor's approach, then, was basically intuitive, and she was not reluctant to admit her dislike for theorizing about literary problems.

It is not surprising that her critical writings are few: three major essays, "The Church and the Fiction Writer," "The Fiction Writer and His Country," "The Role of the Catholic Novelist," and a number of lectures and interviews to which she consented in her later years. It should be obvious from the titles of these assays that the overriding concerns in her criticism are her region and her religion.

Thus it is that any discussion of the mind and art of Flannery O'Connor will of necessity pivot on these two major influences in her life, the South and Roman Catholicism. The combination is indeed unique and goes a long way in explaining the central conflict

in a great deal of her fiction. She was a Southerner, born in Savannah, and reared in the rural community of Milledgeville, Georgia; she was a Roman Catholic which in the rural Protestant South is an alien sect.

Miss O'Connor thought of herself as a Catholic writer and demanded that her audience accept her as one. Again and again she attempted to explain her vision of the world to her astonished critics. In "The Fiction Writer and His Country," she wrote: "I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and that what I see in the world I see in its relation to that. I don't think that this is a position that can be taken halfway or one that is particularly easy in these times to make transparent in fiction."  

The Georgia of both Miss O'Connor's real world and her fictional world is the heartland of primitive Southern fundamentalism where the Christian position, when taken, is not taken "halfway:" it is a region where backwoods prophets and self-styled seers frequently become religious fanatics in their pursuit of personal and direct confrontation with the Almighty. An emphasis on emotion and personal salvation and a disregard of formal, ritualistic worship is characteristic of Southern fundamentalism. This is antithetical to Roman Catholicism with its tradition of identifying and communicating with God through the rituals of the institutional Church. "Miss O'Connor,"

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one critic remarked, "has imposed her Catholic theology on the local image, and the marriage of Rome and South Georgia is odd to say the least."  

If art is born of conflict, it should be clear that Flannery O'Connor had ample raw materials with which to work. Louis Rubin, one Southern critic who does believe in the conflict theory, has written:

There is much to be said for the theory that what makes a writer is a built-in conflict of vision, together with the desire to resolve it. Let him be born into one set of values, and let him be instructed in another and opposed set of values in the life he confronts each day, and the result will be either schizophrenia or else a new perception whereby his experience will be thrown into the illumination that comes of seeing things in stereoscopic distance.  

Whatever else may be said for a "built-in conflict of vision" theory of art, it does seem to find considerable verification in the art of Flannery O'Connor. Only by understanding the very real tensions into which Flannery O'Connor was born do the more drastic tensions in her fiction become fully intelligible. The conflict between Miss O'Connor's region and her religion is finally the key to understanding her use of the grotesque and, perhaps, the key to determining the degree of success her relentlessly distorted fictional world achieves as an artistic creation.


43 The Curious Death of the Novel (Baton Rouge, 1967), p. 239.
Something has already been said about Miss O'Connor's refusal to compromise her Christian position. She was equally committed to her region and strangely enough saw it as a region of special significance for a Catholic writer:

Now the South is a good place for a Catholic literature in my sense for a number of reasons. 1) In the South belief can still be made believable and in relation to a large part of the society. We're not the Bible Belt for nothing. 2) The Bible being generally known and revered in the section, gives the novelist that broad mythical base to refer to that he needs to extend his meaning in depth. 3) The South has a sacramental view of life.... 4) The aspect of Protestantism that is most prominent (at least to the Catholic) in the South is that of man dealing with God directly, not through the mediation of the church, and this is great for the Catholic novelist like myself who wants to get close to his character and watch him wrestle with the Lord.

Her choice, to work with the physical setting she knew so well, precluded a more traditionally Catholic framework; therefore, nuns, priests, convents, and other institutions of the Roman tradition rarely appear in her work. Not infrequently, she felt compelled to defend her donnee. In one of her critical essays, she reaffirms that the South must hold a certain fascination for a Catholic writer precisely because of the perspective by incongruity which it may provide:

The Catholic novelist in the South is forced to follow the spirit into strange places and to recognize it in many forms not totally congenial to him. But the fact that the South is the Bible Belt increases rather than decreases his sympathy for what he sees. His interest will in all likelihood go immediately to those aspects

\[44\] Flannery O'Connor, as quoted by Hyman, pp. 40-41.
of Southern life where the religious feeling is most intense and where its outward forms are farthest from the Catholic.\textsuperscript{45}

Miss O'Connor's sympathy for the intense religious feeling and the sacramental view of life of Bible Belt Protestantism may be misleading for someone who has not yet experienced her fiction, for it is there that her Roman Catholicism and her Southerness most truly explode in that "strange marriage of Rome and South Georgia" at which she officiates. The quiet lady from Milledgeville, Georgia, became the "ferocious Flannery\textsuperscript{46}" in her novels and short stories. What she had to say could not be said quietly, but had to be shouted. The only way she knew how to shout in print was through distortion, violence, and the grotesque.

"Choose this day whom you will serve" is the sometimes spoken, always implied, message throughout her novels and short stories. "Sin, guilt, mercy, and redemption," writes one critic, "are the realities of human life for Flannery O'Connor, and the lives of her characters are violent, mean, frustrated, twisted, and fragmented because man is a sinner."\textsuperscript{47} Miss O'Connor's Bible Belt Christians are people who are materially and spiritually afflicted. She did not feel that ordinary means would serve to expose their condition which she believed an increasingly secular culture ignores; she felt


\textsuperscript{46} Maurice Bassan, "Flannery O'Connor's Way: Shock with Moral Intent," Renascence, XV (Summer, 1963), 195.

\textsuperscript{47} Louise Gosset, Violence in Recent Southern Fiction (Durham, N.C., 1965), p. 75.
that distortion and the grotesque would:

My own feeling is that the writers who see by the light of their Christian faith will have, in these times, the sharpest eyes for the grotesque, for the perverse, and for the unacceptable. . . . The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural. 48

Implicit in her justification for the use of distortion and the grotesque is her contention that contemporary man's sensitivities to natural and supernatural order have become all but dead; only violent means will revive his response to the message:

The novelist with Christian concerns . . . may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience. When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal ways of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures. 49

Her religious message transmitted through the use of the grotesque was bound to be disturbing; her justification for her use of distortion was destined to be even more disturbing. After the publication of The Violent Bear It Away she felt it necessary to justify once again her recourse to distortion in view of a secular, or at best a spiritually indifferent, society:

I don't consciously set out to be more drastic, but this happens automatically. If I write a novel in which the central action is a baptism, I know that for the larger

49 Ibid., p. 163.
percentage of my readers, baptism is a meaningless rite; therefore I have to imbue this action with an awe and terror which will suggest its awful mystery. I have to distort the look of the thing in order to represent as I see them both the mystery and the fact. 50

Her stories, one after another, do in fact erupt in violence, from murders and burnings to blindings and drownings. In almost every case the fiercely violent dramatic scenes are the tragic results of her Christ-haunted grotesques' wrestlings with the Lord. Miss O'Connor's need to distort extends beyond the use of violence to distortion of character as well. Again and again the fanatical and often grotesque zeal of her even more grotesque protagonists leads them to do grievous harm to themselves and others and to commit hideous crimes. Her characters are consistently afflicted by physical and mental deformities as well as spiritual deformities, heightening the wildness of her works. Repeatedly, Miss O'Connor peoples her stories with characters who seem headed for damnation, characters who have prepared their own ends: they did choose whom they would serve. She, true to her words, refuses to let them off the hook by interfering with the consequences of their actions.

The fact that many of her characters are God-intoxicated seems to increase rather than decrease the wildness of their final acts of violence. However, it is just such misdirected religious zeal that constantly preoccupies Miss O'Connor's interests and ironically enough, her sympathies. Her sympathy is not with the final acts of

50 As quoted by Joel Wells, "Off the Cuff," Critic, XVIII (Aug.—Sept., 1962), 4-5.
violence in which her characters are involved, but rather with the belief that her characters have been driven to hatred and violence by a society callous to any sense of dependency on God.

Unlike Erskine Caldwell, whose grotesquerie of the Georgia countryside and its primitive Christians was more humorous than violent, Flannery O'Connor never stopped at the comic surface. For underneath the often naive and crude surfaces of primitive Protestantism she recognized the presence of an intense spiritual life, which, however twisted and grotesque its forms, is authentic and worthy of a more than humorous treatment.

In many respects, Miss O'Connor's theory and use of the grotesque approximates Sherwood Anderson's. In the works of both writers the grotesque becomes a shocking vehicle for a broad social satire, although it is true that Sherwood Anderson is more interested in psychology, while Flannery O'Connor's central preoccupation is religion. No matter how spiritually maimed and twisted her characters may be, no matter how shocking their deformities which are often physical as well as spiritual, she seems to be suggesting that they are not nearly as grotesque as those "normal" and "sane" people who have no spiritual life at all.

"The Fiction Writer and His Country" is Miss O'Connor's most explicit rejection of the contemporary world of compromise and situational morality and her clearest avowal that she will make no

\[51\text{Rubin, p. 242.}\]
concessions to what appears to be a non-Christian world.\textsuperscript{52} In refusing to suggest any alternatives to "Christian orthodoxy," she refuses to make her ideology attractive to non-believers. She uses "hard" terms drawn from classical Christian theology without apology: her vocabulary of "sin," "grace," "redemption," "Heaven," and "Hell" is hardly designed to be attractive to moderns who apparently have little use for Christianity, the Church or its traditional doctrines. Flannery O'Connor has, in a sense, come to call the wicked to repentance.

The crisis in so many of her works, particularly \textit{Wise Blood} and \textit{The Violent Bear It Away}, is centered around the crucial problem of belief. The fact that she was writing in what has been called the "post-Christian world" forced her, as she herself admitted, to adopt the violent method of shock tactics, to use the grotesque to shock, embarrass, and even outrage her readers, rather than submit to the demand for a tamer and more conventional realism.

Not infrequently did Miss O'Connor find herself forced to justify her apparent disregard for a realistic representation of her South. In "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Literature," she speaks freely of this problem which inevitably arises when a writer deliberately chooses to employ distortion in a work, particularly when there is a Southern setting. In a half-serious half-humorous tone she remarks:

\textsuperscript{52}"The Fiction Writer and His Country," p. 160.
I'm always having it pointed out to me that life in Georgia is not at all the way I picture it: the escaped convicts do not roam the roads exterminating families, nor Bible salesmen prowl about looking for girls with wooden legs. The social sciences have cast a dreary bias on the public approach to fiction; when I first began to write, my own particular bete noire was that mythical entity, the School of Southern Degeneracy. Every time I heard about the School of Southern Degeneracy, I felt like Brer Rabbit stuck on the tar baby.\footnote{53}

In answer to the demands for "realistic" literature, Flannery O'Connor insists that the "realism of each novelist will depend on his view of the ultimate reaches of reality"; in answer to the charges against the strange skips and gaps in her own fiction, she replies that her characters "are alive in spite of these things because they have an inner coherence. Their fictional qualities lean away from typical social patterns toward mystery and the unexpected."\footnote{54} For her, any treatment of ultimate reality must deal finally in the mysterious, and "if the writer believes that our life is and will remain essentially mysterious...then what he sees on the surface will be of interest to him only as he can go through it, into an experience of mystery itself. His kind of fiction will always be pushing its own limits toward the limits of mystery."\footnote{55}

Such a writer, she maintains, will be interested in what is not understood in human life. There will be an effort to explore the

\addcontentsline{toc}{section}{Notes}
\footnote{53}{"Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Literature," pp. 271-272.}
\footnote{54}{Ibid., p. 273.}
\footnote{55}{Ibid., p. 274.}
possible, rather than just the probable; he will be interested in characters who are forced out to meet evil and grace and who act on trust beyond themselves, whether they know very clearly what it is they act upon or not."

Even though Flannery O'Connor admits to deliberate distortion of her characters, she is reluctant to admit that her characters are any more "freakish" than ordinary fallen man; in fact, she maintains that her God-intoxicated are less "freakish" because they do admit to the reality of original sin and the consequent need for redemption: "The prophet-freaks of Southern literature are not images of the man in the street. They are images of man forced out to meet the extremes of his own nature."

She all too quickly learned that the average reader is not likely to interpret her grotesques in the way she intended. One reason for the misunderstanding which she has suffered is related to the tradition of the grotesque. In nineteenth-century American writing there was a body of grotesque literature which came from the frontier, was supposed to be funny and was taken lightly; in the case of modern grotesque literature, this is no longer true. The relationship between author and reader in the tradition of the grotesque has significantly changed in the last one hundred years.

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The reader of frontier literature was invited by the author to sit back and assume a superior attitude to the blundering caricatures of western grotesque literature; the reader of modern grotesque literature is asked, even compelled, to see many unpleasant correlations between the grotesque character and himself. Miss O'Connor maintains: "Our present grotesque characters... seem to carry an invisible burden; their fanaticism is a reproach, not merely an eccentricity. I believe that they come about from the prophetic vision peculiar to any novelist, but particularly and in these times deliberately peculiar to the (Christian) novelist..."\(^58\)

It is perhaps the reluctance of many readers to see these characters as a reproach to themselves and their society that accounts for the tendency to misunderstand the works of writers such as Flannery O'Connor.

Having assumed the role of a prophet whose vision was doomed to unpopularity, Flannery O'Connor knew that she was inviting neglect from readers and critics alike. Contemporary society is not inclined to listen to or to try to understand a literature which reflects the disordered spiritual values of the world and which refuses to condone the way things are; it looks instead for writers who speak for and with the prevailing attitudes. As a person, Miss O'Connor refused to accept the reality of the way things are; as a writer, she declined to answer the demand for those novels which the

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public thinks it wants or those which the critics demand.

Not all of her readers were even aware of any dissatisfaction with American values. They would ask how, with all the prosperity and strength and classlessness of American society, could a writer honestly produce a literature which does not make plain the joy of life that should accompany such unparalleled prosperity? To which she answers:

The writer whose position is Christian, and probably also the writer whose position is not, will begin to wonder at this point if there could not be some ugly correlation between our unparalleled prosperity and the stridency of these demands for a literature that shows us the joy of life. He may at least be permitted to ask if these screams for joy would be quite so piercing if joy were really more abundant in our prosperous society.59

As has been previously stated, she felt distortion was necessary to make her vision come alive for the reader. The problem for her as a novelist of the grotesque was to know how far she could distort without destroying:

In order not to destroy the novelist will have to descend far enough into himself to reach those underground springs that will give rank to his work. This descent into himself will at the same time be a descent into his region; it will be a descent through the darkness of the familiar into a world where...he sees men as if they were trees, but walking. This is the beginning of vision.60

And for Flannery O'Connor, the "beginning of vision," a vision which would somehow order the disorder of "near things," was her crucial

belief in the mystery of the Redemption of the world by Christ. She believed that an affinity for the mysterious in no way permitted her to slight the concrete, but that it required her to use the concrete "in a more drastic way...the way of distortion....It's not necessary to point out that the look of this fiction is going to be wild, that it is almost of necessity going to be violent and comic, because of the discrepancies that it seeks to combine." 61

In the light of previous observations, the major theme in all of Flannery O'Connor's fiction should come as no surprise: the Christian religion is a very shocking and scandalous business ("business," as some of her characters would say), and to many its Saviour is a stumbling block, a "bleeding, stinking, mad" grotesque. He is finally the principal character in all of her fiction; and it is her characters' violent and rage-filled encounters with him that is the one story she tells over and over again. One critic has written:

Indeed, the world of Miss O'Connor's fiction seems to wait hourly for Judgment Day—or some new revelation or perhaps a transfiguration, in any case, some sign that the Almighty is still in charge here. Exactly what the event will be is not so important as that her world is subject to the continuous supervision of the Management, who makes itself known sometimes quietly and sedately but, more often here, in a 'purifying terror.'

Flannery O'Connor does not rely on new techniques or startling dislocations of structure by which other modern writers achieve effects of chaos or disorientation or alienation. Her novels and stories are, in time sequence and form, traditionally structured and make no use of the experimental suggestions of a Joyce, Proust, or a Faulkner. There is neither stream-of-consciousness narration nor existentialist brooding over the world's ills. Her works are usually completely faithful to chronology, with no attempt at reproducing psychological distention of time. "So called experimental fiction,"

62 Drake, p. 18.
she once said in an interview, "always bores me. If it looks peculiar I don't read it.... I'm a very traditional sort of writer and I'm content to try to tell a good story...."63 Instead, Miss O'Connor relied upon her use of the grotesque in character and situation to achieve her vision.

Miss O'Connor approaches her subject matter from both explicitly religious and explicitly secular viewpoints. The two novels *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear It Away* explore the madness of those who are possessed by religion: in *Wise Blood*, there is the anti-evangelist Hazel Motes along with a whole line of other self-styled seers; in *The Violent Bear It Away*, there is the backwoods prophet Mason Tarwater and his young nephew, Francis Marion Tarwater. In her two volumes of short stories, Miss O'Connor scrutinizes the afflicted spirits of the more "secular": criminals, hypocrites, Bible salesmen, abandoned children, harassed parents, idiots, and other "displaced" persons who are not officially preachers, prophets or evangelists. Miss O'Connor's eye for the distortions in human nature has created some of the truly unforgettable grotesques of modern Southern literature.

Nonetheless, whether "secular" or "religious," her most grotesque and unattractive characters are those who are "obsessed by religious fervor, inflicted with Bible Belt literalism in its most

63 As quoted by Wells, p. 4.
virulent, uncontrolled, and hysterical form. In the grip of their obsessions, her characters exploit and violate others, mutilate themselves, and engage frantically in arson, fraud, and murder. Miss O'Connor's messianic urge for direct confrontations with the demands of the Christian gospel has created even more unforgettable scenes of grotesque violence.

The "purifying terror" to which the world of her fiction is constantly directed appears only after a slowly-paced uncovering of her unusual people caught up in even more unusual circumstances. There is no better illustration of this in all of her work than the opening paragraph in The Violent Bear It Away. Young Tarwater, the reader discovers later, had promised his uncle, Mason Tarwater, a "Christian" burial when the time came. Miss O'Connor begins:

Francis Marion Tarwater's uncle had been dead for only half a day when the boy got too drunk to finish digging his grave and a Negro named Buford Munson, who had come to get his jug filled, had to finish it and drag the body from the breakfast table where it was still sitting and bury it in a decent and Christian way, with the sign of its Saviour at the head of the grave and enough dirt on top to keep the dogs from digging it up.

In Wise Blood, Miss O'Connor's talent for the bizarre opening is equally jolting. Hazel Motes, the protagonist, is a recent convert to "nothing" and is on his way to the city to preach "the

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64 Gossett, p. 88.

65 The Violent Bear It Away, in Three By Flannery O'Connor (New York, 1968), p. 305. (All further references will be from this edition.)
church of truth without Jesus Christ Crucified." 66 The situation in "A Late Encounter with the Enemy" provides the reader with yet another set of odd circumstances and once again illustrates Miss O'Connor's eye for the unusual: "General Sash was a hundred and four years old. He lived with his granddaughter, Sally Poker Sash, who was sixty-two years old and who prayed every night on her knees that he would live until her graduation from college. The General didn't give two slaps for her graduation but he never doubted he would live for it." 67

All three of these examples, and there are many others as well, point to one of a number of ways in which Flannery O'Connor's fiction is the fiction of the grotesque. It is often by means of a grotesque situation that she begins to create her even more grotesque characters. In the early sections of her stories and novels, Miss O'Connor seems intent on first "disenchancing her reader mainly through a systematic puncturing of the myth of Southern gallantry and gentility." 68 This is essential in order to force the reader to view her world on her own terms. The necessary distortion is her justification for the use of the grotesque.

Particularly in A Good Man Is Hard To Find, Miss O'Connor appears to display almost a penchant for physical and mental
deformity which to the undiscerning reader might suggest that she was morbidly interested in the lunatic and the maimed for their own sakes. Such is not the case; for, in the context of the individual stories, physical or mental deformity, outward and visible, usually signals inner, spiritual deformity, heightening the grotesqueness of her fiction. A survey of some of the more important characters in the various stories will bear this meaning out.

In "Good Country People," Joy Hopewell, a thirty-two-year old Ph. D., has a wooden leg and "goes about all day in a six-year-old skirt and a yellow sweatshirt with a faded cowboy on a horse embossed on it...the large hulking Joy, whose constant outrage had obliterated every expression from her face. Her eyes were icy blue, with the look of someone who has achieved blindness by an act of will and means to keep it." (pp. 243-244) Joy is an atheist. "We are all damned," she says to the Bible salesman whom she sets out to seduce, "but some of us have taken off our blindfolds and see that there's nothing to see. It's a kind of salvation." (p. 258)

Another one of Miss O'Connor's physically deformed villains is Tom T. Shiftlet in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," a one-armed tramp with "his left coat sleeve folded up to show there was only half an arm in it." In a very short time, he manages to deceive the elderly widow, Lucynell Crater, and her deaf-mute daughter, Lucynell Crater, with his fast-talk. "I'm a man," he says with sullen dignity, even if I ain't a whole one. I got a moral intelligence!" (p. 164)
In "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," Miss O'Connor presents the reader with yet another example of shocking physical deformity in the person of the hermaphrodite. However, in this story, the "freak" does not display the grotesque inner distortion that so many of her other physically deformed do. The hermaphrodite, who is one of the side shows of a traveling circus, is one of Miss O'Connor's best examples of the "saved" grotesque when he says to the crowd: "God made me thisaway and if you laugh He may strike you the same way. This is the way He wanted me to be and I ain't disputing His way. I'm showing you because I got to make the best of it. I expect you to act like ladies and gentlemen. I never done it to myself nor had a thing to do with it but I'm making the best of it. I don't dispute hit." (p. 191)

Frequently, Miss O'Connor suggests physical or mental deformity in seemingly undeformed characters through her use of strange and incongruent metaphors which quickly catch both the salient qualities of the person and the author's attitude toward him. For example, the wife in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" has a face "as broad and innocent as a cabbage and was tied around with a green head-kerchief that had two points on the top like rabbit's ears" (p. 129); in the same story, Red Sammy Butts's stomach "hung over (his trousers) like a sack of meal swaying under his shirt." (p. 133) The old Confederate veteran in "A Late Encounter with the Enemy" was "as frail as a dried spider, and every year on Confederate Memorial Day... was bundled up and lent to the Capitol City Museum where he was displayed from one
to four in a musty room full of old photographs, old uniforms, old artillery, and historic documents." (p. 237) The train conductor in "The Artificial Nigger" has "the face of an ancient bloated bulldog" (p. 198); Ruby Hill in "A Stroke of Good Fortune" is "a short woman, shaped nearly like a funeral urn with mulberry-colored hair stacked in sausage rolls around her head." (p. 171) In "The River," five-year-old Harry Ashfield has a "long face and bulging chin and half-shut eyes set far apart. He seemed mute and patient, like an old sheep waiting to be let out." (p. 145)

At times, Miss O'Connor's eye for deformity extends to the natural world. Through her use of strange images and metaphors, she makes nature itself seem ugly. In "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," a cloud "shaped like a turnip had descended over the sun, and another, worse looking, crouched behind the car," and the sun was "like a furious white blister in the sky." (p. 170) In The Violent Bear It Away, as Tarwater approaches the city, he sees "... a hill covered with old used-car bodies. In the distinct darkness, they seemed to be drowning into the ground, to be about half-submerged already. The city hung in front of them on the side of the mountain as if it were a larger part of the same pile, not yet buried so deep." (p. 335)

Miss O'Connor's most explosive use of distortion is finally realized in the grotesque scenes of violence to which every one of her stories leads. The ten stories of A Good Man Is Hard to Find are prefixed by an epigraph from St. Cyril of Jerusalem which serves
to foreshadow the violence in all of her fiction: "The dragon is by the side of the road, watching those who pass. Beware lest he devour you. We go to the father of souls, but it is necessary to pass by the dragon." (p. 128) Repeatedly, her grotesques are exaggerated examples of those who have already been devoured; they have chosen whom they will serve. However, from Miss O'Connor's viewpoint, it is never too late to reverse that decision.

Miss O'Connor once described the volume as "stories about original sin."69 Certainly, in each of the stories, there is everywhere evident evil and corruption in human nature which inevitably explodes in violence and hatred. Miss O'Connor's comment about original sin may be the reason why "a good man is hard to find."

One of the best examples of the violence and unbalance which is spread by the "devil-intoxicated" occurs in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." The Misfit, a psychopathic killer, has squarely faced the crucial problem of belief:

Jesus was the only one that ever raised the dead... and He shouldn't have done it. He thrown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can--by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness.... (p. 142)

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69 As quoted by Drake, p. 24.
The problem for the Misfit is that he cannot accept the truth about Jesus from anyone else. "I wisht I had of been there," he says, "cause if I had of been there I would of known and I wouldn't be like I am now....It's no real pleasure in life." (p. 143) He then coolly and calculatingly wipes out an entire family.

Ironically enough, the Misfit wins something close to a grudging admiration from the reader which the murdered family does not command chiefly because Miss O'Connor spends a good deal of space in the early sections of the story satirizing the smugness and hypocritical "respectability" of the obnoxious family members. The Misfit at least knows who he is and what he is. He has gone to the core of the problem of redemption and has recognized the alternatives posed by Christ's raising the dead. The horrifying revelation which Flannery O'Connor springs in this story is that the violence which seems aimless is really the logical result of the Misfit's decision. He also has the lucidity to make a judgment of his choice: "It's no real pleasure in life." The members of the family, particularly Grandmother, are presented as such shallow representatives of "respectable" people that their final extermination seems to be of little loss.

Violence does not always culminate in deaths or murders in Flannery O'Connor's fictional world. Often, her violent scenes serve to expose the "living dead," or the damned who intend to stay that way.
In "Good Country People," the Bible salesman appears to be another Hazel Motes, wearing the same bright blue suit and wide-brimmed hat, and protesting, "I'm just a country boy." But, he turns out to be one of the truly memorable fake Christians in all of Flannery O'Connor's fiction. Instead of being seduced, he seduces Joy and walks away with her wooden leg stuffed inside his suitcase between two Bibles, saying to her, "You ain't so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born." (p. 261) "Good Country People" is not only another marvelous exposure of a religious fake, but it is more significantly an exposure of a fake atheist duped by a phony Christian.

Another example of the living dead is Tom T. Shiftlet the protagonist in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" who declares that he has a "moral intelligence." If, in fact, Tom T. Shiftlet has any intelligence at all, it is concentrated in one direction—to make off with Mrs. Crater's dilapidated old '29 Ford. He manages to talk the old woman out of the car, but only on her terms—that he marry her deaf and dumb daughter. He agrees. They are married and drive off together in the Ford, that is, until they make their first stop, an eating place called "The Hot Spot." Lucynell falls asleep at the counter where Tom T. Shiftlet and his "moral intelligence" abandon her. A little later, as he is racing towards Mobile before nightfall, and after a young hitchhiker has called Shiftlet's mother "a stinking pole cat," Tom T. prays, "Oh, Lord! Break forth and wash the slime from this earth." (p. 170)
There are many other examples of Miss O'Connor's use of violence which reinforce the distortion in the lives of her grotesques. It would seem that her use of the violent scene is her way of offering her grotesques the opportunity to repent. Few respond in any changed manner. In a lecture she delivered in 1962 entitled "A Reasonable Use of the Unreasonable," she attempted to explain the use of so much violence in her work when she said: "I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace." More often than not, her characters refuse to respond.

Unusual circumstances, grotesque characters, a distorted natural world, and violent actions become the substance of Flannery O'Connor's fiction of the grotesque. There is probably no better example in all of her works of the sustained use of distortion than Wise Blood.

Wise Blood, replete with the familiar themes and trademark characters of Miss O'Connor's fiction, is a tragi-comic account of the making of a young, half-crazed anti-evangelist, Hazel Motes. "Haze" has just completed a tour in the army and is going from his native Eastrod, Tennessee, southward to a city called "Taulkinham" to preach in his own church, the "Church Without Christ." The novel opens with Haze's train ride from Eastrod to Taulkinham; the rest of the action takes place in the latter city, recounting Haze's personal

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and public evangelizing of the "church of truth without Jesus Christ Crucified."

Haze's name is one of many instances of Miss O'Connor's flair for allegorical and symbolic names. Haze does prove to have "hazy" vision and does have "a mote in his eye."

He also has "wise blood," the blood of his circuit-preaching grandfather, "a waspish old man who had ridden over three counties with Jesus hidden in his head like a stinger." (p. 15) By the time he was twelve years old, Haze knew that he was going to be a preacher, but not an ordinary one that "Jesus would have in the end." The "Jesus" and "sin" of his grandfather's shoutings had turned Haze against it all. As a boy, there was already "a deep black wordless conviction in him that the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin." (p. 16)

Haze manages to avoid temptation to sin until he is conscripted into the army. Before he leaves Eastrod, he tells himself that he isn't "going to have his soul damned by the government or by any foreign place it sent him to." (p. 17) Shortly after his arrival at the army camp, he is told by some fellow soldiers, who are trying to lure him away from his Bible to a brothel, that he doesn't have any soul. Haze "took a long time to believe them because he wanted to believe them...and get rid of it once and for all...to be converted to nothing instead of to evil." (p. 17) This is the all or nothing choice which Flannery O'Connor selects as the situation for her strange hero.
By the time he is discharged from the army and on his way to Taulkinham, Haze is "converted to nothing," a self-appointed apostle of negativism who dresses like a preacher. Even the details of Haze's dress and appearance are bizarre. He wears a "stiff black broad-brimmed hat" and a suit that was a "glaring blue with the price tag still stapled on the sleeve of it." (p. 9) However, it is Haze's eyes that attract attention, eyes that were the "color of pecan shells and set in deep sockets...settings so deep that they seemed almost like passages leading somewhere...." (p. 10) His behavior is as strange as his appearance. He says little to the other passengers other than a sneering, "I reckon you think you been redeemed." (p. 12)

After Haze reaches the city, Miss O'Connor's flair for the grotesque erupts with frenzied energy. Even though Haze says to Leora Watts, the prostitute, that he's "no goddam preacher," he grasps every chance to announce his new church, "the church of truth without Jesus Christ Crucified." Haze proclaims that the way to the truth is "Blasphemy": "I'm going to preach there was no Fall because there was nothing to fall from and no Redemption because there was no Fall and no Judgment because there wasn't the first two. Nothing matters but that Jesus was a liar." (p. 60) Haze has not side-stepped the issue: he has chosen.

The novel is crowded with other characters not so bold as Haze, but equally crazed and grotesque: people who feel the need of some king of "outside help," some sort of "Jesus." Among them are the familiar O'Connor characters, rural Southerners uprooted from their
traditional environment and set down in the anonymity of the city.

One such character is Enoch Emery, a young prophet who has come from the farm to the city and taken a job as guard in the city museum. Miss O'Connor describes him as a "damp-haired pimpled boy" with "yellow hair and a fox-shaped face" who wears a "yellowish white suit and a pinkish white shirt and a tie the color of green peas." (p. 27) Enoch asserts that he has "wise blood like his daddy" that tells him what is important and when things are going to happen. And this wise blood urges him to show Haze his secret Jesus—a dwarf-like mummy in the museum. "See theter notice," Enoch tells Haze, "it says he was once as tall as you or me. Some A-rabs did it to him in six months." (p. 57)

In this unbalanced world of religiosity, Enoch later steals the grotesque relic and sets it up in his room like a god in a tabernacle. Then, when Haze proclaims that "the Church Without Christ don't have a Jesus but it needs one...it needs a new one," (p. 78) Enoch's wise blood tells him who will be the new Jesus—the mummy.

Enoch takes the "new Jesus" to Haze's room and gives it to Sabbath Lily Hawks who has moved into Haze's bed. She cradles the mummy in her arms and addresses Haze as its "daddy." It is at this point that the whole distorted and unbalanced world of Taulkinham begins to erupt in violence. Raising one hand in the air, Haze

71 "that there" (Miss O'Connor often attempts to render her character's speech habits in dialect spellings.)
"lunged and snatched the shriveled body and threw it against the wall. The head popped and the trash inside sprayed out in a little cloud of dust." (p. 102)

After the smashing of the mummy-Jesus, Haze searches out Onnie Jay Holy (his real name is Hoover Shoats), a religious fake and con-man who had earlier tried to talk Haze into a pay-as-you-go religious racket. "Friend," Onnie Jay had said to Haze, "you and me have to get together on this thing." (p. 86) But Haze, with his perverse honesty, would not have anything to do with the modern-day money-changer in the temple. Intent on making money off Haze's new church, Onnie Jay hires Solace Layfield to impersonate Haze. Solace "had consumption and a wife and six children and being a prophet was as much work as he wanted to do." (p. 109) Solace Hayfield becomes the second victim of Haze's rage to obliterate fakes when Haze drives his high old "rat-colored" Essex car over the doomed man's struggling body. Afterwards, Haze says, "Two things I can't stand—a man that ain't true and one that mocks what is." For Haze, there is no choice but violent action when he is confronted with either. Before he leaves the mangled body, Haze contemptuously examines the front of the Essex "to see if there had been any damage done to it." (p. 11)

Following the grotesque scene with Solace, Flannery O'Connor begins a rather hasty closing down of the mad world of Taulkinham. Haze loses his beat-up old Essex when a patrolman pushes it over an embankment. It had been his pulpit. Earlier he had told Sabbath Lily that "nobody with a good car needs to be justified." (p. 71)
After the "sacrifice" of the Essex, Haze undergoes some kind of fierce conversion and blinds himself with lime. To his landlady, who "was not religious or morbid, for which every day she thanked her stars," he says, "you can't see," as presumably he now does in blindness.

The reader is reminded at this point of an earlier passage in the novel when Haze "saw Jesus move from tree to tree in the back of his mind, a wild ragged figure motioning him to turn around and come off into the dark where he was not sure of his footing, where he might be walking on the water and not know it and then suddenly know it and drown." (p. 16)

Like some early Christian ascetic, Haze further mutilates himself by wearing barbed wire beneath his shirt and lining his shoes with gravel, broken glass, and pieces of small stone. When his landlady asks him why he walks on stones, Haze answers: "To pay...It don't make any difference for what. I'm paying." A little later, he answers, "I'm not clean." (p. 121)

Haze's landlady, trying to understand her tenant's strange "monkish" ways, thinks to herself:

How would he know if time was going backwards or forwards or if he was going with it? She imagined it was like you were walking in a tunnel and all you could see was a pin point of light; she couldn't think of it at all without that. She saw it as some kind of a star, like the star on Christmas cards. She saw him going backwards to Bethlehem and she had to laugh. (p. 119)

In the last lines of the novel, she bends over his dead body and sits "staring with her eyes shut, into his eyes, and felt as if
she had finally got to the beginning of something she couldn't begin, and she saw him moving farther and farther way, farther and farther into the darkness until he was the pin point of light."
(p. 126) This is after Haze has gone out to a drainage ditch to die a sacrificial death at the hands of the police.

Earlier, this study indicated that *Wise Blood* has all the characteristics of Flannery O'Connor's later works: the grotesque and distorted characters in *Wise Blood* not only look strange, but say and do stranger and not infrequently violent things that shock and jar even the dullest sensibilities. In *Wise Blood*, there is no question about Flannery O'Connor's rendering of the grotesque; there is some question of her rendering Haze's conversion as a sympathetic, credible, motivated act if, indeed, his radical transformation is to be read as a "conversion" at all.

In a short preface to the 1962 edition, Miss O'Connor wrote:

*Wise Blood* was written by an author congenitally innocent of theory, but one with certain preoccupations. That belief in Christ is to some a matter of life and death has been a stumbling block for readers who prefer to think it a matter of no great consequence. For them Hazel Motes' integrity lies in his trying with such vigor to get rid of the ragged figure who moves from tree to tree in the back of his mind. For the author Hazel's integrity lies in his not being able to. (p. 8)

It would seem, then, that Haze's self-inflicted blinding and early Christian ascetic penances are authentic reflections of a conversion.

The only other possible interpretation would be to read Haze's conversion ironically as another act of grotesque narcissism. An ironical reading of Haze's conversion would preclude the charge of
artistic inconsistency in the novel. However, Miss O'Connor herself would seem to stipulate against that interpretation by her insistence on Hazel's "integrity."

The problem in Wise Blood is, in fact, a problem in Flannery O'Connor's later works as well: her needs as a writer of the grotesque conflict with her needs as a Christian writer. At times, too much distortion makes it nearly impossible to recognize any positive moral message in her fiction which she insists is there.

One of Miss O'Connor's more insistent statements that she could be both grotesque and moralistic in her writing came during a lecture at Notre Dame University in 1957 when she said:

The serious fiction writer will think that any story that can be entirely explained by the adequate motivation of its characters, or by believable imitation of a way of life, or by a proper theology, will not be a large enough story for him to occupy himself with. This is not to say that he doesn't have to be concerned with adequate motivation or accurate references or a right theology; he does; but he has to be concerned with these only because the meaning of his story does not begin except at a depth where these things have been exhausted. The fiction writer presents mystery through manners, grace through nature, but when he finishes there always has to be left over that sense of Mystery which cannot be accounted for by any human formula.72

What this problem in Flannery O'Connor's fiction quite clearly points to is the extent to which the grotesque has developed since its appearance in the early American writings of Brown, Poe, and the others. In the works of late twentieth-century writers of the

72Mystery and Manners, p. 153.
grotesque, notably the Southern Gothics, the grotesque has been placed in the service of a serious moral purpose. In Flannery O'Connor's fiction, this purpose is pervasively religious. Judged by her own explicit statements of her aims and intentions, Flannery O'Connor's work is an interesting failure. She often intimated that behind the grotesque lies the ultimate concept of straightness without which the grotesque is meaningless: "To recognize the grotesque, you have to have some notion of what is not grotesque and why." For her, straightness meant cooperating with the "moment of grace." However, these "moments of grace" are not fully realized in the works themselves, and a reader not alerted to them would fail to find them at all. As Flannery O'Connor herself has agreed, it is not theology as such which makes good art.

Whether Christian or not, most readers will have to agree that Miss O'Connor's diagnosis of the human condition or predicament in the late twentieth-century is substantially valid: man's life does seem warped away from human values. For Flannery, man cannot justify himself; he cannot reconcile the contradictions of human existence on his own: Christ has already done it. Readers who find the Christian message unacceptable, whether because illogical, absurd, or simply too good to be true, must finally part company with Miss O'Connor.

73 As quoted by Drake, p. 39.
There will be those who find her grotesque vision comic; there will be those who are repulsed; and there will be those who find it tragic-comic.

Finally, it is this writer's opinion that even though there will be many readers who cannot honestly share the theological assumptions which are part of her donnee, they should, nonetheless, be willing to respect and read Flannery O'Connor for her courage to say the things she felt needed saying.
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