

# Violence as a Vessel of Grace: The Fiction of Flannery O'Connor

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*Scholars have tried to define the grace depicted in Flannery O'Connor's short stories by putting it in different categories, rarely coming to the same conclusion. I argue that O'Connor is not writing about a new or different kind of grace, but instead the same grace that the Bible expresses. Her fiction can serve as a reminder to our Christian belief that God extends grace, even in grotesque or violent situations.*

I once received a letter from an old lady in California who informed me that when the tired reader comes home at night, he wishes to read something that will lift up his heart. And it seems her heart had not been lifted up by anything of mine she had read. I think that if her heart had been in the right place, it would have been lifted up.

FLANNERY O'CONNOR WRITES this in a letter to a friend as an example of the feedback she receives on her fiction. Even in the face of criticism, of which there was plenty, she was never one to apologize for the nature of her stories. Fifty-five years since her death, Flannery O'Connor and her fiction are still under debate, often in heated discussions. The Southern writer is most famous for her Catholic faith, her grotesque writing style and her strange combination of the two. One area of debated O'Connor scholarship is her frequent use of brutality and violence as an expression of Christian grace in her two novels and thirty-two short stories. Walter Sullivan summarizes all of the conclusions in her short fiction: 'Of the nineteen stories, nine end in the violent death of one or more persons. Three others end in...physical assaults that result in bodily injury. Of the remaining seven, one ends in arson, another in the theft of a wooden leg, another in car theft and wife abandonment.' (qtd. in Sullivan, Kinney 72). These endings, despite their violence, bring on a moment of grace for the characters: a realization of the world in which they reside, themselves or their Creator. The association between the violence and grace provokes scholarly discussion that brings the definition of Christian grace and the theological

accuracy of O'Connor's narrative into question.

Many have tried to put the grace O'Connor writes about into categories by breaking it down in terms of theology or literary style, for the most part coming to different conclusions. Some scholars argue that her depiction of grace confuses the understanding of Christian mysteries, such as the sacraments, while others say O'Connor never meant for her form of grace to be defined at all. Even with insight from O'Connor's letters and essays about her intention as a writer of the grotesque style, there is still disagreement on the matter. It has come to my attention that there may be so much dissent because it is jarring for a Christian reader to see an association between violence and sacred grace. But, though our instinct might be to resist and disassociate ourselves with the likes of Flannery O'Connor, I urge readers to instead listen to the less-told stories of O'Connor's characters. I would go so far as to say that O'Connor's definition of grace is not unwarranted, nor does it need a category, because it is fundamentally nothing new: grotesque grace is O'Connor's depiction of God's grace.

O'Connor describes fiction as an 'incarnational art'; Brian Abel Ragen, in his analysis of innocence, guilt and conversion in Flannery O'Connor's work, clarifies, 'she meant that in fiction every idea—even the most exalted and mysterious—must take a physical form.' This would imply that O'Connor uses mundane things in the physical world to represent more complex and abstract ideas such as grace, that are difficult to put in words. This is what makes her treatment of grace so fascinating: no one expects grace incarnate to be grotesque. Susan Srigley attributes O'Connor's outlook on fiction to her Catholic background that provides perspective through a sacramental lens, as

though O'Connor 'understands human suffering to be linked in some way to the Incarnation and suffering of Christ' (95). In this way, the more severe and shocking the ending of her story, the more it becomes clear to the reader how much redemption the characters need. In light of this incarnational worldview, one begins to understand O'Connor's use of the horrid circumstances that her characters often find themselves in. She may have believed that it was her duty and her vocation to represent God's grace, as a writer, and preach the gospel through even the most violent narratives.

However, in his work titled *Flannery O'Connor and the Fiction of Grace*, Arthur F. Kinney expresses his hesitation to condone O'Connor's style and presents the idea that 'it is O'Connor herself who has made grace grotesque, who has got the notion of grace all wrong.' This is not only doing O'Connor an injustice, but also treating the grace of God rather flippantly. God's ultimate act of grace was the death of his only son—Jesus Christ—for the salvation of man, described by Dietrich Bonhoeffer as 'costly grace;' by definition, 'costly because it condemns sin... grace because it justifies the sinner.' The grace in O'Connor's work is doubtless costly grace: it cost her characters their pride, their way of life or even their lives. It is not a stretch to say that a grace that is so costly can be represented in something one might not describe as easy or beautiful; it might even be found in the grotesque. Grotesque in literature is somewhat different from the adjective (meaning repulsive or comically ugly or distorted), instead it means the 'familiar distorted' or mixing ideas that do not naturally fit together that usually blurs the line between reality and fantasy (The Masters Review). H. D. Dutt made this connection in the title of her dissertation *The Grotesque Cross: the Performative Grotesquerie of the Crucifixion of Jesus*. She outlines the historical event of the crucifixion as resembling to the grotesque and outlines how the very symbol of the cross can be viewed as such. Therefore, the fiction of O'Connor is not unique in its grotesquerie, in fact, as a representation of the most grotesque event in history—the death of the innocent Son of God for the salvation of sinners—it makes sense that her expression of grace is grotesque as well. In this way, O'Connor did not invent grotesque grace, as Kinney implies, she merely embodied it in her stories.

The Bible, however, never describes grace as grotesque, in fact, biblical grace tends to refer to God's general unwarranted favor granted to man, 'and all are justified freely by grace through the redemption that came by Jesus Christ' (Romans 3:24, *NIV*). The definitions of grace related to singular events vary in branches of the Church and even in

different denominations.

The contrast in definitions of grace in separate branches of Christianity is outlined and applied to O'Connor's theology by Emily Strong. She details Protestant grace 'as a gift given from God to those he sees fit to bestow it upon' whereas the Catholic perspective, according to Strong is, 'that man must "sacrifice" (a form of worldly merit) in order to fully receive God's grace.' She comes to the conclusion that though O'Connor may have some aspects of Protestant as well as Catholic grace in her stories, O'Connor 'was less concerned with the exact doctrine as she was with the conversion itself.' This begs the question as to whether O'Connor would have wanted her work to be dissected for doctrines or definitions, when the bigger message of her stories may be lost.

When asked about the meaning behind specific aspects of her work, O'Connor answered vaguely; her letters tell of a young teacher asking her the significance of a specific character's hat (hats having symbolic importance in many of her stories), to which she replied, 'It is to cover his head.' Patrick Garret York decides that her vagueness is entirely intentional. He analyses glory in the fiction of C. S. Lewis and grace in the work of Flannery O'Connor, concluding that 'they withhold the answers to essential mysteries' by writing stories 'with no solution but that which comes with the understanding of the vanity of attempting to solve the mystery at all.' He might agree with Strong in the belief that O'Connor had no intention of detailing "her" grace; Lewis and O'Connor are, after all, not theologians but fiction writers. They are to represent the realities of these mysteries, not explain them.

Many scholars reframe O'Connor's grace with adjectives such as 'violent' or 'grotesque,' as if her depiction needs separation from all others. In my search for a reason as to why this might be, I was reminded of the introduction of *A Memoir of Mary Ann*, a little girl born with a tumor on her face, that O'Connor wrote as a favour to the nuns who cared for the child. O'Connor said in their exchange that she was 'opened up to a new perspective of grotesque,' with reference to how people represent good and evil:

Few have stared at [the face of good] long enough to accept that its face too is grotesque, that in us the good is something under construction. The modes of evil usually receive worthy expression. The modes of good have to be satisfied with a cliché or a smoothing down that will soften their real look. When we look into the face of good, we are liable to see a face like Mary Ann's, full of promise.

I think O'Connor would have seen the separating of

“her” grace from others as the same sort of ‘softening’ of the face of good. It is clear that she did not believe she was writing about a different kind of good or a different kind of grace, she was only defying the Christian writer’s tendency to ‘soften their real look.’ This is not to minimize the good works of many Christian fiction writers other than O’Connor who have embodied abstract aspects of Christian faith in a different way. When asked about whose approach to fantasy was better, J. R. R. Tolkien or C. S. Lewis, English professor and scholar David C. Downing responded with 1 Corinthians 12:4-6, “There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in every-one it is the same God at work.” His response is not irrelevant in the discussion of portrayals of grace in fiction; just because two representations are different does not mean one of them is wrong. Think of all the many faces of Jesus that have been painted in the millennia since his physical existence; though they are not the same face exactly, they are not inaccurate portrayals. However, there is a shortage of representations of Christian grace like O’Connor’s because it is an uncomfortable topic in Christian literature as believers tend to focus on the beautiful side of grace rather than the side the nuns saw in Mary Ann. Grace that is grotesque requires a new level of submission in our own lives in facing the reality of our brokenness. And this is hard to do.

It should be mentioned that O’Connor has said explicitly her intended audience was not Christians, but non-believers, ‘people who think God is dead.’ In one of her essays she addresses authors writing for an audience that has different beliefs than them: ‘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.’ Unequivocally, O’Connor’s work has ‘startling figures,’ but with this simple explanation it becomes clear why she felt the need to use such extreme and bizarre representations. Her fiction’s embodiment of God’s grace was one that required a shock factor.

Though she was referring to non-believers, in a way, even we believers can be ‘hard of hearing’ when it comes to the discussions of difficult aspects of our faith and her stories scream out to us with their violent and vivid message. It is possible she intended her writing for the unbelieving believers; those who need reminding that the only reason

we receive eternal grace is through the blood and gore of a crucifixion. The God-given remembrance of grace through the Eucharist is to drink blood and eat flesh—that is decidedly grotesque. O’Connor’s fiction may be a way Christians can heed the call to the realization that we are sinners in need of salvation and answer the invitation to suffer with Christ, for Christ.

To conclude, the grotesque and the idea of God’s grace as represented in O’Connor’s stories, are not foreign to each other. She did not write about a new form of grace, but an old one that is hard to read about, not because it is an inaccurate representation, but because it is a truthful one. And, if our hearts are in the right place, they will be lifted up.

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