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Flannery O'Connor: Shocking Generations or Inspiring Christianity?

Literature and readers go hand-in-hand, each influencing the other in equal ways. Reader response criticisms, though, focus mainly on how a reader interprets a work and what meaning a reader gives to a writing, deeming a readers' reaction to literature vital to the interpretation of the meaning of the text (Purdue). A good example of this literature-reader relationship is the work of Flannery O'Connor. Born and raised in Georgia as a member of a devout Catholic family, O'Connor's life and worldview were highly influenced by the Catholic beliefs of her family, and these beliefs appear often in her writing. O'Connor utilized shocking and even vulgar writing to shock her readers into seeing her beliefs and recognizing grace stating, "When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal means 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," (ISI) but her meaning was often misunderstood. Reader response criticism focuses on what meanings people assign to a writing, whether or not they contradict the author's intentions. While O'Connor writes her stories to depict a moment of grace, reader's often find her writing more vulgar than inspirational.

O'Connor employed grotesqueness and violence in her stories to illustrate the workings of grace on her characters, but more profoundly she was attempting to simulate the workings of grace in the sensibility of the reader. O'Connor used her position as a writer to try to "achieve a kind of spiritual super-realism, since both her experience and orthodoxy taught her that all humans are morally grotesque" (Leonard). One classic example of O'Connor's vulgar writing is her short story, "A Good Man is Hard to Find." Many question why O'Connor uses such graphic and crude descriptions in her story such as her description of the grandmother, "with her legs crossed under her like a child's and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky;" however, it is not the dead body that O'Connor wishes to express to the reader, but rather the successful action of grace and a soul entering into blessedness. In the final moments of her life, the grandmother sees her moral kinship with the Misfit, leading to her identification with him. O'Connor wants to depict the moment that the grandmother realizes the flaw in the way she has been practicing Christianity and using her religion in ways in which she seems fit, manipulating it to suit her own purposes in order to conform to her own personal view of righteousness; the character is simply a mode of getting the message across. O'Connor uses this moment to demonstrate the beliefs of the average person blinded by secular thought, but many readers are too appalled by the graphic violence and blatant murder to see the message of grace in O'Connor's writing. After reading "A Good Man is hard to find," Tate Barber confesses, "I was honestly so shocked I didn't even notice the moment of grace until you pointed it out," and his sentiments are shared by other readers saying things like, "A story that teaches us no more about humanity than a quip in the newspaper regarding yet another

senseless homicide,” - Joseph DiFrancesco. When confronted with her audience’s confusion about her use of grotesque characters, O’Connor stated: “since the sixteenth century [the world] has been increasingly dominated by secular thought, [so] the Catholic writer often finds himself writing in and for a world that is unprepared and unwilling to see the meaning of life as he sees it. This means frequently that he may resort to violent literary means to get his vision across to a hostile audience,” (ISI). Despite the fact that many of her readers did and do not understand O’Connor’s religious message at first glance, she continued to write using shocking violence and grotesque characters to portray her message.

O’Connor uses her writing in order to inspire her audience toward Christianity, but the message of her work is often mistaken. In “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” the Misfit says of the grandmother, “She would have been a good woman ... if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.” This line is the theme of the story and indicates that the Grandmother deemed herself a “good christian” through life, but it wasn’t until faced with a violent death that she recognizes kinship between herself and the misfit as God’s children and is shown redemption and true Christianity. While this theme may seem clear to someone instructed to recognize O’Connor’s underlying Christian message, it is not as apparent to the average reader who describes her work as, “center[ing] upon two themes: selfishness, and individualism. Essentially the grandmother’s insistence on achieving her own selfish ends results in the death of her entire family, as well as the loss of her own life,” (Palmer). In this case, O’Connor’s work was again interpreted differently than intended with the reader

focusing on the grandmother's shortcomings rather than her redemption. O'Connor's work is often misinterpreted.

While O'Connor meant to clearly depict a moment of grace and salvation in her story "A Good Man is Hard to Find," much of her audience did not see the story through the lens of grace. Clara Claiborne Park argues that "'A Good Man Is Hard to Find,' along with O'Connor's other stories, fails to reveal the 'moment of grace' O'Connor meant it to reveal. The repetitive mayhem of her fiction, does not invite belief but parody," (Leonard 49). Park, like many of O'Connor's readers, is too caught up in the "mayhem" of O'Connor's writing to see the grace she aims to depict. One could say that the spiritual purpose in O'Connor's fiction is disguised. Nevertheless, her Christian vision is manifested in her literary techniques. Brainard Cheney, an early critic who noted this manifestation in his 1964 *Sewanee Review* essay on her fiction, brings into perspective O'Connor's Christian vision, and her purpose as a writer: "She invented a new form of humor. . . . This invention consists in her introducing her story with familiar surfaces in an action that seems secular, and in a secular tone of satire or humor. Before you know it, the naturalistic situation has become metaphysical and the action appropriate to it comes with a surprise, an unaccountability that is humorous, however shocking. The *means is violent*, but the end is Christian," (ISI). Cheney expresses O'Connor's goal of bringing a Christian end to a story, but readers of O'Connor's writing sometimes cannot make it past the violent means in order to make it to the Christian end. Lisa from *GoodReads* says, "I could not finish it. Trust me, I tried. The first 5 minutes were awesome,

but then all those characters were killed and I didn't enjoy any part of the book after that point.”

Lisa illustrates the common reason as to why O'Connor's writing is misinterpreted. Much of O'Connor's audience is so blinded by the brutality and strangeness of her writing that they are unable to see O'Connor's meaning.

Flannery O'Connor writes stories of shocking encounters with Christ in order to convey to her readers that the world holds the opportunity for salvation, however, her Christian message is often misunderstood. O'Connor's blunt and violent writing many times shocks her readers away from her message. For most readers, any message of grace is washed away by the devastating and abrupt ending of “A Good Man is Hard to Find.”

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