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Independent Study: Flannery O'Connor  
Spring 2009  
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*Acknowledgements*

Special thanks to Dr. Lee Ann Clements and the JU Undergraduate Research Fund for making  
this entire project possible.

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Mary Flannery O'Connor was born old and died young. Taken by lupus at only 39 years old, her relatively small collection of work—two novels and thirty short stories—left an indelible impression on literature and helped define Southern gothic fiction. Her collections of essays and lectures later in life further contextualize her writing by illuminating her views and perceptions that shaped the way she saw the world and crafted her art. Set against the backdrop of the South,

O'Connor was born in 1925, and many unique characteristics mark her childhood. Her parents, Edward and Regina, were rather progressive, allowing her to call them by their first names. Another liberty they allowed was letting her write in her books, which she frequently did, sometimes offering her opinion of the book on the title page. Biographer Brad Gooch notes a few such writings in his 2008 biography *Flannery*. In Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, she wrote: "Awful. I wouldn't read this book." (48) In Shirley Watkins' *Georgina Finds Herself*, she stated bluntly: "This is the worst book I ever read next to Pinocchio." (48) Not all of her books were criticized so heavily, however. In Louisa May Alcott's *Little Men*, she scrawled in pencil on the flyleaf: "First rate. Splendid." (47)

In 1929, O'Connor was only six when she experienced her first brush with fame. She had somehow taught a chicken to walk backwards, and Pathé News sent a cameraman from New York to Savannah to film the bird wonder. Dressed in her Sunday best, she coaxed the fowl for hours while the cameraman waited, less than patiently, in the hot, Savannah sun. Just as he started to pack it in, the bird began to hop backwards, to which O'Connor clapped her hands and bounced alongside the chicken. The cameraman managed to capture the event, and the short film ran in theaters preceding feature films in most major cities, except, unfortunately for the O'Connors, Savannah. O'Connor never got to see herself or her bird on the screen, but she referred to the event throughout her life as the high point of her celebrity. In her essay on peacocks titled, "King of the Birds," she reports, "Shortly after that, she [the chicken] died, as now seems fitting" ("Mystery and Manners" 3). To say that O'Connor loved birds would be a severe understatement. After the incident with Pathé News, she turned her attention to peacocks, eventually

Her father worked in real estate, and the Depression hit the family hard. In her early adolescent years, the O'Connors joined Regina's mother's family in Milledgeville as her father went on to Atlanta to find work. In 1942, she graduated high school and enrolled at Georgia State College and University, then a women's school, also in Milledgeville. She received a bachelor's degree in Social Science in 1945 and was accepted into the prestigious MFA program at the University of Iowa Writer's Workshop the following year. During this time, she published her first short story, "The Geranium," after which she began working on her first novel, *Wise Blood*.

In 1949, after a brief period of time in an artist's commune, she moved into an attic room in the house of her editor and his wife in Connecticut, where she continued to work on her novel and publish short stories. Her plans changed, however, when, while waiting for a train after a visit home in Milledgeville, she fell terribly sick and was hospitalized for an extended time. She was diagnosed with lupus, the disease that took her father when she was thirteen, in 1951. This prompted her move back to Georgia to live with her mother at Andalusia, a working farm which Regina had inherited and subsequently ran during O'Connor's time away.

Her health slowly deteriorated, and they made accommodations. Unable to navigate the stairs with her aluminum crutches, the downstairs waiting room was converted to her bedroom, where she spent her mornings writing at a small desk next to her bed. In the afternoons, she would see friends on the farmhouse's wide front porch, or, an avid letter-writer, she would correspond with those unable to visit.

Though hampered by her illness, O'Connor made it a point to travel as best she could, usually to speak about her work. Near the end of 1955, she traveled to New York City to give a lecture at the University of Iowa (to give a lecture at the University of Iowa in 1951)g57



oceans of filth, for whom God would roll up his sleeve, plunge his hand into the muck, grasp their ankles and drag them kicking and screaming into heaven. In her quintessential story, “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” a convicted killer known as The Misfit closes the story by killing an old woman. This woman, having spent the decades bitter and venomous, pleads for her life, appealing to any belief in Christ the murderer might have. She becomes more and more fervent to “save him” until she ultimately calls him “one of her babies.” The Misfit recoils, fires a gun, and old woman finally realizes grace as the bullet enters her body. She dies with a smile on her face, to which her killer says, “She would have been a good woman... if someone had been there to shoot her every day of her life” (“The Complete Stories” 133)

Throughout her career, she was often asked to share her views on the South and the grotesque in literature, and her speaking engagements were very nearly always about the writer’s life and craft. Regarding her choice of bizarre characters, she believed that a true accomplishment in literature occurred when a so-called freak became a placeholder for the reader, and for her, that was the magic moment she always sought to attain in her own work. She did not, however, agree with many of the critics that tried to label her, or any other writer for that matter, often bristling, if tongue-in-cheek, at their opinions. Asked once about the use of the grotesque in her work, she replied that her work is only called grotesque by northerners, and if she were to write something truly grotesque, they would merely call it realistic (“Mystery and Manners” 40).

Her approach to character and plot amounted to what she referred to as seeking prophetic vision. Another quote from *Mystery and Manners* illustrates this point further:

I am always having it pointed out to me that life in Georgia is not at all the way I picture it, that escaped criminals do not roam the roads exterminating families, nor do Bible salesmen prowl about looking for girls with wooden legs. [...] In the novelist’s case, prophecy is a matter of seeing near things with their extensions of



unpublished work and left it in the care of her publisher. This seems to indicate an unspoken desire that not just her work, but the philosophies that motivated them, remain in circulation in the event that she did not return. This is just one example of the notable disparity between the opinions she held of the significance of herself and the significance of her ideas. Incidentally, the only form of literary criticism in which O'Connor placed any merit is New Criticism, in which the critic only regards the words on the page—the text and text alone—and no attention is given to the writer.

While O'Connor may not approve of the practice of Biographical criticism, it seems clear that all these facets of her life speak directly into her work, informing the reader of deeper meanings behind the peculiar stories that she left for consideration. With yet another disparity, from her own mouth, she affirms the validity of this approach:

In the greatest fiction, the writer's moral sense coincides with his dramatic sense, and I see no way for it to do this unless his moral judgment is part of the very act of seeing, and he is free to use it. I have heard it said that belief in Christian dogma is a hindrance to the writer, but I myself have found nothing further from the truth. Actually, it frees the storyteller to observe. It is not a set of rules which fixes what he sees in the world. It affects his writing primarily by guaranteeing his respect for mystery. ("Mystery and Manners" 31)

While an intelligent literary critic acknowledges that there is no one correct way to interpret any given text, the "right" answer in this case would be a summary of the points reviewed, in typically academic fashion with evidence, supporting arguments, powerful points, dramatic details and ample alliteration. I would, however, like to end with something much more subjective, turning from biographical criticism to reader response, if not all the way to pilgrim's progress.

During my trip, I kept a journal, documenting not only what I did but how I responded to it. O'Connor refers to the South as "hardly Christ



("Mystery and Manners" 44). Savannah, and especially Milledgeville, are unquestionably Flannery-haunted.

When I began this project, I titled it "Flannery O'Connor Is Hard to Find," a play on her short story title and an acknowledgement that she did her best to remain obscure. This image was taken at Andalusia Farm, and I thought it appropriate to describe the feelings I experienced in undertaking this study. For much of the trip, I felt blocked at every turn, from a broken No Trespassing sign at the family home in downtown Milledgeville, to a roped-off room at Andalusia, to a nondescript grave that I almost missed. Perhaps most frustrating was being informed upon my arrival at the Special Collections room at the GCSU library that they required a minimum of two week's notice to prepare for visitors and that I would not be allowed to see any of her manuscripts or effects.

The following is an excerpt from my journal:

*allowed, to which the young woman in a severe business suit replies with a firm and slightly more appropriate than I had realized. Or, perhaps, easy to find but hard to document.*

*I enter the room, and I am alone. The walls feature several quotes, many of which I have recently read, and I smile. A large photograph of her reading a book as a child sits on a bookshelf, the entire case housed in glass. Next to the picture is a typed letter, in which and her christening gown the roots of her faith. A second cabinet features yearbooks, drawings and other items from her college years.*





Works Cited

Gooch, Brad. Flannery a life of Flannery O'Connor. New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2008.

Lynn, Steven. Flannery O'Connor. New York: Basic Books, 1998. Print.