

**Flannery O'Connor**  
**A Sermon for King's College Chapel, 30 October 2016**  
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Flannery O'Connor was a twentieth century Southern American Catholic Christian, and an author of novels and short stories. She was born in the Southern state of Georgia in 1925. Her family and her early education were devoutly Catholic. After graduating from Georgia's state college for women, she joined the postgraduate writing program at the State University of Iowa, where she became versed in William Faulkner, James Joyce, Franz Kafka, T. S. Eliot and the New Criticism, while also continuing to attend mass daily. She lived briefly in New York, but she could not abide the city. She rented a flat in Connecticut attached to the home of a couple who would become her literary editors and executors. She wrote her first novel in their happy company. She then returned to Georgia, writing her second novel and numerous short stories in the family home – a relatively modest farm with the grand name: Andalusia.

If you are unfamiliar with Flannery O'Connor's work, you may be forgiven if, on the one hand the idea of twentieth-century fiction inspired by Christian convictions puts you in mind of CS Lewis's fanciful, adventurous and allegorical novels; or if on the other hand the idea of American Christian fiction puts you in mind of saccharine sweet morality tales, utterly devoid of irony or complexity. Flannery O'Connor's work, however, could not more resolutely confound either sort of expectation. She and her work were not only American, they were deeply Southern; she and her work were not only Christian, they were deeply Catholic. And for O'Connor, writing Catholic fiction in the mid-century American South meant writing something altogether startling.

In fact, her stories more closely resemble the horror genre in which some of us may be indulging to mark Halloween than they do the genres which we might read to our children at bedtime. Her stories are shocking, sometimes revolting, drenched in ironic and tragic violence and death. Like horror stories, her narratives often turn on shocking scenes for which the reader could not have been prepared: a grandmother is shot point blank; a disabled child is intentionally drowned; two upstanding citizens choose not to intervene, watching coldly as a migrant worker is killed by a tractor; a little boy hangs himself in an effort to meet his dead mother. Yet O'Connor's work is not horror, which uses the grotesque to thrill and entertain. Rather, her work employs the grotesque to enable perception of what is most deeply true of both humanity and divinity.

In 1955, she corresponded about a recent review in the *New Yorker* which called her new short story collection 'brutal and sarcastic'. She said, 'The stories are hard but they are hard because there is nothing harder or less sentimental than Christian realism. . . when I see these stories described as horror stories I am always amused because the reviewer always has hold of the wrong horror' (*Collected Works* 942).

For Flannery O'Connor, true horror was located in the nihilism of modern life – a nihilism which is so normal and comfortable that she believed something like the grotesque must be employed to reveal its horror. She said, '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; and he 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 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' (*Collected Works* 805-806).

A cursory reading of her fiction, full as it is of tragically flawed fundamentalist Christians, can lead to the assumption that as a highly educated Catholic who had sojourned in the Northeast, she was lambasting the ignorant fundamentalism surrounding her in rural Georgia. However, more attentive reading soon makes clear that the fundamentalists are her allies; she values their edgy if misguided zeal, and they help her shout for the hard of hearing and draw startling figures for the almost blind.

Her target is not fundamentalism but the morally stultifying practical nihilism of both bourgeois Protestantism and intellectual atheism. Alongside the raging fundamentalists of her stories are the explicitly unbelieving intellectual types and the respectably religious types who do not genuinely believe anything. When the paths of these various characters cross, something joltingly terrible often ensues.

On the one hand, lazy bourgeois Protestantism has no time for suffering; on the other hand, intellectual atheism says that there can be no such thing as a good God because there is so much suffering. Neither are able to hold together the mysterious and painful yet liberating gospel of God who in Christ Jesus entered into human suffering and took it upon himself. Flannery O'Connor's stories did not preach this gospel; instead they sought to jolt readers out of the stupor of their nihilism and point them towards the gospel's sacramentality – the mysterious presence of the empowering grace of God in our normal, material existence.

Flannery O'Connor believed that only bad religious fiction seeks to display convictions through arranging characters and events into 'satisfying patterns'. She said that more faithfully Christian fiction arises from sacramental theology; the novel, she said 'must penetrate the natural human world as it is' (*Mystery and Manners* 163). The jolting and often violent culminations of her stories were penetrations of the world as it is and preparations for receiving grace in the midst of that world (*Mystery and Manners* 112). Sometimes the moment of grace is refused, sometimes embraced, most often it seems to be planted like a seed, the fruition or death of which is left unknown, beyond the narrative.

This deep sense of the real presence of God's grace within all the material and complicated, bright and dark corners of human experience was central not only to O'Connor's work but to her own short life. At the age of 25, when Flannery O'Connor's career was just taking off up north and she felt she had found her home amongst like-minded people, she began suffering chronic pain and was diagnosed with the same severe form of lupus which had killed her father when she was 15. Her return to Georgia from Connecticut was not willing; it was forced upon her by the fact that her disease made it impossible to live independently. Most of her startling tales of sacramental grace in the midst of acute human suffering arose from over a decade of torturous personal suffering, from which she died when she was just 39. She wrote the way she did because she believed that this was where her identity as believer and her identity as novelist were intertwined. Because, she said, the believer and the novelist share 'a distrust of the abstract' and 'a desire to penetrate the surface of reality and to find in each thing the spirit which makes it itself and holds the world together' (*Mystery and Manners* 168).

## Recommended Reading

Flannery O'Connor, *Collected Works* (The Library of America, 1988). The authoritative collection of O'Connor's novels, short stories, essays, and correspondence in one volume.

\_\_\_\_\_, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970).

Paul Elie, *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003). A journey through the intersecting lives of mid-century American Catholics Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, and Flannery O'Connor.

Brad Gooch, *Flannery: A Life of Flannery O'Connor* (Little, Brown 2010).

Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love* (Morehouse, 2005). An exploration of theology, art, and literature in conversation with Jacques Maritain, Eric Gill, David Jones, and Flannery O'Connor.

Ralph C. Wood, *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South* (Eerdmans, 2004). A theological introduction to and exploration of O'Connor's work.