

Institute for Christian College Teaching
Education Department of Seventh-day Adventists

The Salvation Theme in
Flannery O'Connor

by

Carol Sample, Ph.D.

Department of English and Communication
Southwestern Adventist College
Keene, Texas

Prepared for the
Faith and Learning Seminar
held at
Union College
Lincoln, Nebraska
June 1989

041 - 89 Institute for Christian Teaching
12501 Old Columbia Pike
Silver Spring Md 20904, USA

The stories of Flannery O'Connor, a twentieth century Georgia writer, are modern parables with the explicit intention of jolting her readers into recognition of their own spiritual depravity in spite of their sometimes moral, upright lives. These stories, perceptively taught, present a wealth of material for the Seventh-day Adventist teacher to explore with her students. Jesus himself told stories to make the truth about people and the kingdom of God more vivid. Although some of the parables may have had their foundation in actual experience, certainly they all did not, i.e. the parable of the rich man Lazarus. Certainly Heaven and Hell are not within shouting distance of each other! The christian literature teacher uses fiction in the same way as Jesus used it: To jar her students into an awareness of who God is and who we are in the hope that they will perceive what is valuable now and eternally. Assisting students in developing their own world views and christian value system is a primary goal for the serious literature teacher.

Flannery O'Connor was born in Savannah, Georgia, in 1925 to a Roman Catholic family. Except for brief periods of time when she was pursuing her education in Iowa and living with friends in Connecticut, she spent most of her thirty-nine years in and around Milledgeville where she lived with her widowed mother. Her father died of Lupus when Flannery was 16, and the same disease ravaged her own short life. Her love for birds, particularly peacocks, and her ability as a cartoonist are evident in some of her stories, but the tenets of her Christian Catholicism are present everywhere. "Christian theology is absolutely essential for a proper understanding of her work" (Drake, 6).

Flannery O'Connor "apprehends man's predicament in terms of classical Christian (Catholic) theology, and she uses the traditional terms without flinching: sin, grace, redemption, Heaven, Hell, and all the rest" (Drake, 15). Hers is the sacramental view; the physical world and all that pertains to it are emblematic of the sacred and should be so regarded as, indeed, they are in her fiction. Flannery O'Connor takes seriously the importance of the christian writer and often seems to regard herself as a prophet or and evangelist "to call the wicked to repentance--and none more so than the modern intellectuals who have no use for Christianity, the Church, or its traditional doctrines" (Drake 15).

Flannery O'Connor made her Christian commitment as an artist unmistakably plain: "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 relation to that. I don't think that this is a position that can be taken half way or one that is particularly easy in these times to make transparent in fiction" (Drake 13). Miss O'Connor leaves no doubt as to her stance as a writer; her world view is that of a committed Christian who views life as a sacramental journey:

The idea of voyage, emphasizing suffering, penance pity thus become Flannery O'Connor's ideal form of narrative action. Employed as a metaphor in her fiction, it suggests that all life is essentially a pilgrimage, horrible and dangerous, moving always toward the terror of damnation or safety of blessedness. On a purely literal level many of Miss O'Connor's stories trace quests through a world which is potentially chaotic. But at the analogical level they are journeys involving death, judgment, heaven and hell. . . ."All O'Connor's characters remind us that our lives are a pilgrimage and that we go to heaven, or hell, by walking on real roads" (Muller, p. 75)

Because so many of the travelers along the road--whether rich or poor, good or bad, wise or foolish--are so jaded and blase', Miss O'Connor resorts to comic violence--a fitting oxymoron when applied to her stories and novels; however, neither the comedy nor the violence exists for its own sake. To achieve her objective she employs exaggeration in the creation of grotesque characters that are at once comic and obnoxious, and even those characters who present the most "religious" point-of-view are comic caricatures, (Stephens, 2).

Frequently the term "black humor" is applied to Miss O'Connor's fiction, but hers is not the humor of the bizarre tall tales of the Southwest humorists which dominated regional literature of the late 1980's. Nor is her work akin to the Southern Gothic of writers such as Edgar Allan Poe. Miss O'Connor's major theme . . . is that the Christian religion is a very shocking, indeed, a scandalous business . . . and that its Savior is an offense and a stumbling block, even a 'bleeding stinking mad' grotesque to many . . . He revolutionizes the whole creation and turns the whole world upside down, to the scandal of those who believe that two plus two always equals four . . . or those who believe they don't need any help (a savior) because they are doing all right by themselves . . . (Drake 17).

O'Connor's characters, whether "bad" or "good" by society's standards, are grotesque, ridiculously but tragically humorous as they wrestle, consciously or unconsciously with their petty day by day existence against their Creator-God by whom and for whom they were made. The literature of despair of many of today's post-modern writers whose characters have no transcendent belief live

without hope, purpose or meaning. These characters and their empty lives are often referred to as "absurd," and some of them, in a sense, are similar to Flannery O'Connor's grotesques. Jacob wrestling with the angel was comically ridiculous until he recognized with whom he was contending. Like Jacob, most Flannery O'Connor's characters experience spiritual crisis at the moment of physical or emotional agony. Not all are redeemed; but if they live through the ordeal, they are changed in a marked way.

Sometimes her grotesque characters, such as the Misfit in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," are society's outcasts. People like the Misfit "are necessary in order to gain the attention of the typical reader and cause him to recognize his absolute dependence on God. The true cultural grotesques are, however, the pseudo-refined, well-mannered members of the community who ignore the spiritual foundations of their own lives. O'Connor is, as it were, "holding the mirror up to Nature."

The grotesque, a feature which plays such a prominent role in O'Connor's work, also serves to bind the laughable and the serious. O'Connor is obviously intrigued by the radical deviation from the norm and her work abounds in figures of extreme incongruity (Walters 29).

Her ability to fuse grotesque vision and theological vision is her greatest literary gift. Her talent is to shape reality convincingly to orthodox Christianity (Muller 112).

The ten stories in her first volume of short stories, A GOOD MAN IS HARD TO FIND, are prefaced by an epigraph from St. Cyril of Jerusalem:

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. 'Who or what is the dragon? Is it the devil who has many Protean forms or could it be Christ, the tiger, who in a sense does devour us when we fail his sphinx riddle: 'What think ye of Jesus?' (Drake23)

Miss O'Connor's story, "a Good Man is Hard to Find," is definitely black humor, but there are also similarities to Leland Ryken's description of the book of Job as "a comic narrative comprised of elements of wisdom, drama, lyric, and tragedy (Ryken 109). Elements of all these various genres are evident in O'Connor's story, and the comic conclusion, though vastly different from Job in the literal sense, does seem to fulfill Ryken's definition of comedy which occurs when the plot structure of a given narrative is U-shaped, i.e., with the action beginning in prosperity, descending into tragedy, and ending well. Ryken

succeeds in demonstrating that in Job's case he was wealthier, healthier, and better off at the end of his harrowing ordeal than he was at the beginning of the tale.

Applying this theory to "A Good Man is Hard to Find," we find the story beginning with a family of six planning a vacation. The family consists of Bailey, the irritable father dressed in a bright yellow shirt with blue parrots, who as far as meaningful action is concerned is little more than the driver of the car. The drab and nameless mother and baby, along with two obnoxious children, John Wesley, age eight, (his name could well be a clue to the methodist orientation of the family and his younger sister, June Star, complete the immediate family who, in spite of tragedy, fail to enlist the reader's sympathy in any meaningful way. They are grotesque characters as are the two principal characters, the grandmother, who is the mother of the children's father, and the Misfit. The grandmother with her superficial ideas of culture, history, religion and refinement is determined to avoid going anywhere that might bring them in contact with the Misfit. Nevertheless, it is the grandmother who controls the direction of the family, and ironically brings them into contact and conflict with him. In every significant aspect it is the grandmother's story with the major conflict occurring between her pseudo-Christian values and the confused, garbled, yet somewhat perceptive notions of the criminal known as the Misfit. "I call myself the Misfit because I can't make what all I done wrong fit what all I gone through in punishment."

The grandmother, much to the children's annoyance, will be accompanying the family--only she wants to go to Tennessee instead of Florida because she wants to see "her connections in East Tennessee." In addition, she warns that an escaped convict known as the "The Misfit" is "aloose from the Federal Pen and headed toward Florida. ...I wouldn't take my children in any direction with a criminal like that aloose in it. I couldn't answer to my conscience if I did. ...Ought to take them somewhere else for a change so as they would see different parts of the world and be broad."

The grandmother's suggestion evokes various responses from the family. Bailey continues reading the orange sports section of the JOURNAL, and the children's mother remained non-committal. Only John Wesley looked up from the funny papers long enough to retort, "If you don't want to go to florida, why doncha stay home?"

"She wouldn't stay home to be queen for a day," June Star added without raising her yellow head. "She wouldn't stay home for a million bucks. ...Afraid she'd miss something. She has to go everywhere we go."

Once the journey got underway, the quarrelsome children sat

on each side of the grandmother in the back seat. The grandmother pointed out places of interest, suggested they play travel games, and tried to appease the children when they began hitting and slapping each other across her lap. June Star's ugly disposition and ill manners are most apparent when the wife of the restaurant owner where they stopped for lunch asked her if she would not like to come and be her little girl: "No, I certainly wouldn't. ...I wouldn't live in a broken-down place like this for a million bucks!" These glimpses into the personalities of the characters are important with respect to the reader's emotional response to them and the outcome of the story. Flannery O'Connor has no truck with sentimentalism.

Because the grandmother is the protagonist, the reader experiences the story, for the most part, through her consciousness; however, she, too, fails to enlist our sympathy. Her main concerns are self-serving ones, and her selfishness and self-righteousness are quite transparent. With her "big black valise that looked like the head of a hippopotamus," she was the first one in the car ready to go. Hidden in a basket under the black valise was Pitty Sing, the family cat, which the grandmother had smuggled into the car because she couldn't bear to leave it at home alone. She knew instinctively that Bailey would be angry to arrive at a motel with a cat! Ironically, it is the cat and the grandmother who precipitate the final climactic action. With full awareness that paraphrases and one-liners are no more the story than a cherry is a piece of the pie, the grandmother's character is poignantly revealed in Miss O'Connor's description of her at the beginning of the trip.

The old lady settled herself comfortably, removing her white cotton gloves and putting them up with her purse on the shelf in front of the back window. The children's mother still had on slacks and still had her head tied up in a green kerchief, but the grandmother had on a navy blue straw sailor hat with a bunch of white violets on the brim and a navy blue dress with small white dot in the print. Her collars and cuffs were white organdy trimmed with lace and at her neckline she had pinned a spray of cloth violets containing a sachet. In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady.

Since in all good stories everything--characters and conflict--point to the climax, the impact of "A Good Man is Hard to Find" depends upon the reader's perception of the six family members as they are, revealed in their words and actions. An understanding of Flannery O'Connor's fictional characters is indispensable if the reader is to appreciate her tremendous witness for Christ through fiction.

In spite of the grandmother's best efforts to make the trip interesting, the trip proves to be boring until the grandmother remembers a plantation house with a long tree-lined road leading up to it. Furthermore, she says the house had a secret panel, and this sparked the interest of John Wesley and June Star. After much coaxing and complaining on their part, Bailey grudgingly consents to deviate from the main road in order for them to see the house. In order for them to get there, they have to back track and worst of all travel on a dusty gravel road. While Bailey mumbled about the loss of time and the terrible road, the grandmother had a most disturbing thought: the house was in Tennessee, not Georgia! The grandmother re-acted both emotionally and physically and in her excitement upset the valise in the corner, thus disturbing the cat in the basket. The instant the valise moved, the newspaper covering she had placed over the basket moved and immediately Pitty Sing gave a snarl and sprang onto Bailey's shoulder. The description of the resulting accident and its aftermath is among the best in grotesque and black humor, and it is the accident which brings the family into confrontation with the Misfit. This proves to be a fatal accident--fatal for all six--because of the grandmother's recognition and foolish identification of him: "You're the Misfit. ...I recognized you at once."

"Yes'm," the man said, smiling slightly as if he were pleased in spite of himself to be known, "but it would have been better for all of you, lady, if you hadn't reckernized me."

As the Misfit stalls for time, the grandmother insists to the point of screaming: "I know you're a good man. You don't look a bit like you have common blood. I know you must come from good people." The Misfit was inclined to ponder the grandmother's assertion about his being a good man, but the children made him nervous.

Ignoring Bailey's reiterated, "Listen, we're in a terrible predicament," the Misfit ordered Hiram and Bobby Lee, his companions in crime, to take Bailey and John Wesley off into the woods that "gaped like a dark open mouth." Two pistol shots, one following immediately after the other, announced the fate of father and son.

"Bailey Boy!" the old lady shouted, but the Misfit remained oblivious as he recalled the various occupations of his past:

I was a gospel singer for a while. ...been most everything. Been in the arm service, both land and sea, at home, abroad, been twice married, been an undertaker, been with the railroads, plowed Mother Earth, been in a tornado, seen a man burnt alive...I even seen a woman flogged.

At this point the grandmother turned self-serving evangelist and continues in this role almost-but not quite-to the time of her death. "Pray, pray," she urges, "pray, pray." "If you would pray, Jesus would help you."

"That's right," the Misfit said.

"Well then, why don't you pray?" she asked, suddenly trembling with hope.

"I don't want no hep. ...I'm doing all right by myself." At this point in the story the grandmother and the Misfit, although opposites in many respects, are actually two sides of the same coin--the coin of self-righteousness. Both the protagonist and the antagonist are equally in need of grace, and the drama being enacted by the grandmother and the Misfit, is definitely reminiscent of Luke 18:10-14 in the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican.

When Hiram and Bobby Lee return from the woods with Bailey's yellow shirt with the bright blue parrots, the Misfit puts it on and orders the two younger men to take the mother, baby, and June Star into the woods where the same scenario is re-enacted. Alone with the Misfit, the grandmother discovered that for once she was speechless. Again she wished to tell him that he must pray, and finally she found herself saying, "Jesus, Jesus," but the way she was saying it sounded as if she might be cursing!

'Yes'm' the Misfit said as if he agreed. 'Jesus thown everything off balance. It was the same case with him as with me except He hadn't committed any crime and they could prove I have committed one because they had the papers on me. Of course, he said, they never shown me my papers That's why I sign myself now. I said long ago, you get you a signature and sign everything you do and keep a copy of it. Then you can hold up the crime to the punishment and you see do they match and in the end you'll have something to prove you ain't been treated right. I call myself The Misfit,' he said, 'because I can't make what all I done wrong fit what all I gone through in punishment.'

The conclusion of the Misfit's conjecturing was punctuated with screams and shots from the woods. At this point the grandmother's desperate and total concern for herself concludes with a bribe: "I'll give you all the money I got."

To which the Misfit replies, "lady, . . . there never was a body that give the undertaker a tip." Two more shots and the Misfit continues his rationalizing:

Jesus was the only one that ever raised the dead . . .

and He shouldn't have done it. He thown 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.

By this time the Misfit had nearly converted the Grandmother to his philosophy of the absurd point-of-view, and the frenzied old woman monetarily and hysterically questioned the resurrection of Jesus even as she sank to the ground in emblematic gesture with her legs crossed and doubled beneath her. O'Connor portrays the Misfit as one who would really like to believe that Jesus raised the dead but somehow cannot:

I wasn't there so I can't say He didn't . . . I wish I had of been there. . . . It ain't right I wasn't there because if I had of been there I would of known. . . . And I wouldn't be like I am now.

The Grandmother's head cleared for a moment of spiritual illumination as she witnessed the genuine anguish of a man on the verge of salvation. For one brief instant the Misfit and the grandmother merge in the commonality of their humanity. For a moment these two are transfixed by the compelling compassion found in the love and mercy of Jesus: "She saw the man's face twisted close to her own as if he were going to cry and she murmured, 'Why you're one of my own babies. You're one of my own children!' She reached out and touched him on the shoulder. The Misfit sprang back as if a snake had bitten him and shot her three times through the chest."

For the hitherto selfish, prideful grandmother who "half sat and half lay in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a child's, her face smiling up at the cloudless sky," it was the moment of salvation, the moment of grace and epiphany. For the Misfit, on the other hand, it was the moment of damnation and condemnation to the world of the absurd: "It ain't no real pleasure in life" are the closing words of the story spoken by Misfit. Flannery O'Connor did, indeed, believe the Misfit's ultimate evaluation of life to be a valid one for the non-Christian. "The Misfit, despite his debased spirit and insane intelligence, understands well enough that he is seeking meaning in a world deprived of Christ" (Muller 67). That the antagonist was a man of perception, in spite of his crudeness, is clear in his final, accurate evaluation of the grandmother: "She would of been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life."

So for the grandmother the plot has come full circle. She has made the archetypal journey into the self and recognizes her

kinship to the Misfit. because she experiences the recognition that spiritually she and the Misfit share the common bond of humanity, the grandmother receives grace and salvation only moments before her death.

The plot, like the book of Job, has come full circle and the story does for the protagonist, have a happy ending albeit, in terms of black humor. Some critics prefer to call it tragicomedy, "a form now widely recognized as the dominant mode of the age" (Walters 23). Since it is the grandmother with whom we as readers identify, there is the double shock of recognition: because of the grandmother's self-righteous stance, we recognize our own spiritual poverty. At least I believe that is what Flannery O'Connor had in mind. Through the combination of black humor, the grotesque, and the absurd, Miss O'Connor jolts the reader into a new sense of seeing and feeling in a manner quite unlike any other modern Christian writer.

In "Revelation," a story with the same salvation theme, O'Connor also skillfully combined elements of comedy and tragedy in recognizable characters that both shock and amuse us. At the same time they image for us the absurdity of life without Christ, which for her was life without meaning. Flannery O'Connor, an unabashedly Christian writer, was a devout Catholic and her world view was definitely sacramental. Her use of the physical world and the people and things intrinsic to it were but emblems to be used for spiritual insight. The physical world was but a means in the process of realizing God's grace; however, in the Southern Bible Belt she was surrounded by fundamentalist anti-intellectualism, and O'Connor's imaginative talent to draw upon and fuse both of these traditions is unique, indeed.

The absurd agonies of Miss O'Connor's characters present a penetrating critique of the purposelessness of existence without God. . . . She is at once struck by man's roguish capacity for salvation. Her characters . . . seem to articulate perfectly the metaphysical possibilities of salvation or damnation. And this tension illuminates the fundamental mystery of all creation, wherein even the lowest are capable of election. This is the burden in one of the most extraordinary stories in Flannery O'Connor's fiction. (Muller, 112-113)

This is the theme of one of O'Connor's later stories entitled, "Revelation." This is no place to argue the validity of visions. What is significant here is the tolerance of the artist toward all humanity.

The setting was quite typical--the familiar, small, almost full country doctor's waiting room. At the moment Claud and Ruby

Turpin (his rather large wife) walked in, the room, which was scarcely bigger than a garage, suddenly seemed over-crowded. Not only did the patients represent the thinly populated area of Georgia which they inhabited, but not unlike Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha characters, they were a cross-section of humanity, a mimesis which took in all the so-called civilized Christian world.

Pushing Claud--who in certain respects resembled Thurber's Walter Mitty--Ruby Turpin scrutinized the patients one at a time, pegging each of them into the appropriate notch on her own hierarchial Great-Chain-of-Being. There was the blond boy with the dirty romper who took up more than his share of the sofa but made no effort to move so that at least one of the Turpins could sit down. Then there was a pleasant well-bred lady with stylish gray hair and her fat but sullen daughter, a Wellesley student, engrossed in a book called HUMAN DEVELOPMENT. The girl, whose name was Mary Grace, had a bad case of acne and intermittently glowered at Mrs. Turpin as though she would like to strangle her. Then, too, there was a lanky old man with "a rusty hand on each knee" who was sleeping--or perhaps he only pretended to be sleeping so he would not feel obliged to offer Mrs. Turpin his seat. Mrs. Turpin surveyed the scene and concluded that the leathery-looking old woman in a print feed sack dress was the dirty child's grandmother while sitting at right angles from them was the child's mother in a grimy yellow sweat shirt and gritty burgundy slacks. The rims of her lips were stained with snuff and she was wearing black straw bedroom slippers laced with gold braid.

"White trash," thought Mrs. Turpin as she looked condescendingly at the loathsome appearance of the woman and breathed a prayer of thankfulness to God for making her just exactly as she was. Even her name became her--Ruby, a precious gem of rich red brilliance. The fact that "Turpin" could be related to turpitude or turnips apparently had never occurred to her, so she was completely pleased with herself right down to her oxymoronic name, Ruby Turpin.

Once she dreamed that when God was populating the earth, He had only two places open and he gave her the choice as to which she preferred to be: She could be a negro or she could be poor white trash. Since God refused to negotiate, Ruby finally said: "All right, make me a nigger then--but that don't mean a trashy one." And God would have made her neat and clean and respectable--just like herself, only black.

Sometimes Mrs. Turpin occupied herself at night naming the classes of people. On the bottom of the heap were most colored people, not the kind she would have been if she had been one, but most of them; then next to them--not above, just away from--were the white trash; then above them were the homeowners, and above them the home-

and-land owners, to which she and Claud belonged. Above she and Claud were people with a lot of money and much bigger houses and much more land . . . Usually by the time she had fallen asleep all the classes of people were moiling and roiling around her head, and she would dream they were all crammed in together in a box car, being ridden off to be put in a gas oven.

Mrs. Turpin had the habit of scrutinizing the feet of people. If one were in a restroom where one could see only the feet of those in the individual cubicles, she could tell at a glance the kind of person that those feet were attached to. Like the red and gray suede shoes had to belong to the well-dressed lady with graying hair while the girl scout shoes and heavy socks inevitably were the selection of her daughter, the rebellious Wellesley girl engrossed in the book on human development. Her tennis shoes betrayed the sloppy old woman and, appropriately enough, Mrs. Turpin's smart black patent leather pumps became the lady she was.

Finally, a chair became available and Mrs. Turpin gently eased herself into it. They were at the doctor's office because a cow had kicked Claud earlier that morning resulting in a huge swelling on his marble-white calf and causing him to limp. On this particular day Claud's name befit his condition, "claudification," meaning a halt in a person's walk, or a limp. The name itself has comic overtones much as James Thurber's Walter Mitty.

Garrulous woman that she was, Mrs. Turpin soon struck up a conversation with the pleasant-faced lady with the red and gray shoes. Mary Grace's annoyance with Mrs. Turpin was apparent from the moment she entered the waiting room but as the conversation crescendoed to include the Negro problem, and the remote possibility of sending them back to Africa in spite of the Negroes' preference to remain here and gradually lighten their color, the Wellesley girl began to smoulder. Ruby Turpin's smug self-righteousness enveloped Mary Grace like a dark cloud, much to her well-bred mother's chagrin.

To help anybody out that needed it was her philosophy of life. She never spared herself when she found somebody in need, whether they were white or black, trash or decent. And of all she had to be thankful for, she was most thankful this was so.

By this time the crater that was Mary Grace was on the verge of eruption. Although she was into psychology, not theology, and may never have opened a Bible, the parable in Luke 18:9-15 was appropriate to the situation:

And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others; Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a

Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I possess. And the publican standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. I tell you this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted. (KJV)

There is no doubt that Flannery O'Connor was well aware of the parable. The Pharisee was in need of grace as was Mrs. Turpin, even though neither were aware of their true condition. In "Revelation" Mary Grace, the loony girl from Wellesley, becomes the agent of grace to Ruby Turpin in a rather unexpected manner.

'If it's one thing I am,' Mrs. Turpin said, it's grateful. When I think who all I could have been besides myself and what all I got, a little of everything, and a good disposition besides, I just feel like shouting, 'Thank you, Jesus for making everything the way it is!'

At this point the emblematic moment occurs when Mary Grace quite literally erupts and disrupts the scene by hurling her book on Human Development at Mrs. Turpin, hitting her just above the left eye. The next moment the Wellesley girl lunges at Mrs. Turpin throttling her by the throat, pulling her to the floor, and causing complete chaos in the waiting room.

The book struck her directly over her left eye. It struck almost at the same instant that she realized the girl was about to hurl it. Before she could utter a sound, the raw face came crashing across the table toward her howling. The girl's fingers sank like clamps into the soft flesh of her neck. She heard the mother cry out and Claud shout, "Whoa!" There was an instant when she was certain she was going to be in an earthquake.

After several minutes and much ado the resulting turmoil ceased and Mrs. Turpin's head began to clear as people and objects regained their proper perspective. Somehow Mrs. Turpin intuitively sensed that she had known this young woman somewhere beyond time and space. Holding her breath, she asked, "What you got to say to me?" And she waited as if she were expecting a revelation. The lunatic girl raised her head long enough to transfix her gaze on her interrogator and repeated: "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog." God's intervention could not be more clear. (Baumgaertner, 115)

Mrs. Turpin interprets this message from God and she is

hurt and puzzled by it. 'The message,' she complains, 'had been given to Ruby Turpin, a respectable, hard-working, church-going woman.' (Baumgaertner, 115)

It is significant that it was the trashy white woman who had expressed the most hostility and prejudice toward the blacks, but she had NOT been singled out as the object of Mary Grace's anger. "Instead it is Mrs. Turpin, who masks her prejudices with smiles and waves, who FEELS (emphasis mine) she is a good person. That she is hit over the eye is significant, for SHE MUST BE GIVEN NEW VISION" (Baumgaertner, 115)

"That ther girl is going to be a lunatic, ain't she?" the white trash woman queried, but the nurse made no reply. In the meantime Mary Grace had been appropriately sedated while she and her mother waited for the ambulance to come. The doctor treated Mrs. Turpin's scratched neck for infection and applied an ice pack to the rapidly swelling area over her eye. Claud's leg was treated and they were soon on their way home.

What followed next was the beginning of Ruby Turpin's mystical descent into what Evelyn Underhill refers to as "the dark night of the soul." Arriving home, the Turpins both felt in need of rest, so they decided to take a nap; however, Ruby Turpin could not get her mind of the girl's scathing indictment.

..."I am not," she said tearfully, "a wart hog from hell." But the denial had no force. The girl's eyes and her words, even the tone of her voice, low but clear, directed only to her, brooked no repudiation. She had been singled out for the message, even though there was trash present. The full force of this fact struck her only now. There was a woman there who was neglecting her own child but she had been overlooked. The message had been given to Ruby Turpin, respectable, hard-working, church-going woman. The tears dried. Her eyes began to burn instead with wrath.

The realization and acceptance of her own need of grace did not come easily for Ruby Turpin whose inward emptiness had been concealed by the outer appearance of respectability and right-doing. She was a white sepulchre; albeit she did not know it. Late in the afternoon, still righteously indignant, Mrs. Turpin shuffled out to the Pig Parlor, with its concrete floor, where she found Claud hosing the pigs down, a daily task. At that point she began her quarrel with God all over again. True to the Aristotelian concept of anagnorisis, Mrs. Turpin's self-knowledge did not come easily. The emotions she experienced in the Pig Parlor included all five of Evelyn Underhill's mystical passages necessary to the purification of the soul: (1) the awakening of the self, (2) the dark night of the soul, (3) illumination, (4) purification of self, and (5) ultimate union with God and all His human creation. The

following argument with God expresses Ruby Turpin's awakening of the self and the dark night of the soul:

What do you send me a message like that for? she said in a low fierce voice....How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from Hell too?..... Why Me? she rumbled. "It's no trash around here, black or white, that I haven't given to. And break my back to the bone every day working. And do for the church....How am I a hog? Exactly how am I like them?....There was plenty of trash there. It didn't have to be me....If you like trash better, go get yourself some trash then....You could have made me trash. Or a nigger. If trash is what you wanted, why didn't you make me trash?....I could quit working and take it easy and be filthy....Lounge about the sidewalks all day drinking root beer. dip snuff and spit in every puddle and have it all over my face. I could be nasty.

The process is painful and difficult, but Ruby Turpin's quarrel with God does conclude with the recognition that Mary Grace was for her an agent of grace. In fact, she is the only character of Miss O'Connor's who outlives her moment of epiphany. The sublime imagery of the last two paragraphs of the story transport the readers beyond the worldly as they blend into the mystical experience of all the pilgrims on the journey to the Kingdom of Heaven, where the first shall be last and all artificial human hierarchies are dissolved into one redeemed society.

Until the sun slipped finally behind the tree line, Mrs. Turpin remained there with her gaze bent to them as if she were absorbing some abysmal life-giving knowledge. At last she lifted her head. There was only a purple streak in the sky, cutting through a field of crimson and leading like an extension of the highway, into the descending dusk. She raised her hands from the side of the pen in a gesture hieratic and profound. A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They

alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away. She lowered her hands and gripped the rail of the hog pen, her eyes small but fixed unblinkingly on what lay ahead. In a moment the vision faded but she remained where she was, immobile. At length she got down and turned off the faucet and made her slow way on the darkening path to the house. In the woods around her the invisible cricket choruses had struck up, but what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah.

Just as the prodigal son "came to himself" in the pig pen, Ruby Turpin in the pig parlor realizes her own need, and with it the realization that she - Ruby Turpin "shares with the rest of Christendom a double identity - as both saint and sinner." (Baumgaertner 114)

Works Cited

- Baumgaertner, Jill. Flannery O'Connor: A Proper Scaring. Wheaton, Il.: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1988.
- Drake, Robert. Flannery O'Connor: A Critical Essay. Edited by William B. Eerdmans, 1966.
- Eggenchwiler, David. The Christian Humanism of Flannery O'Connor. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1972.
- Muller, Gilbert N. Nightmares and Visions. Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1972.
- O'Connor, Flannery. The Complete Stories. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1946.
- Prenshaw, Peggy, Ed. Conversations with Flannery O'Connor. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1987.
- Stephens, Ralph. The Correspondence of Flannery O'Connor and the Brainard Cheneys. Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1986.
- Walters, Dorothy. Flannery O'Connor. New York: Twayne Publishers Inc., 1973.