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The Crystal of Eternity and the Matter of Events

The Christian Message in Flannery O'Connor's Works

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Abstract: This article discusses the Christian message present in Flannery O'Connor's fiction. The author begins by exploring the main ideas in O'Connor's essays included in the volume *Mystery and Manners*, and thus outlines the context of her literary work. First, the author situates the American writer's fiction within the context of her era, which was characterized by both unbelief and the search for God. The author aims to answer the question of how O'Connor conveys the human experience of encountering God in a way that is both natural and supernatural, without resorting to simplification or sentimentalism. This introduction serves as a basis for an analysis of O'Connor's artistic vision, which focuses on the issue of human salvation. The author employs literary and philosophical categories identified in O'Connor's texts. These include the mystery and texture of events, the habitus of art, and anagogical reading. The author also explores the significance of the grotesque and humor in O'Connor's Christian message. She discusses the short story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" as an example of how the novelist conveys the Christian message in her fiction.

Keywords: O'Connor, faith, truth, anagogical reading, habitus of art

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Kryształ wieczności i materia zdarzeń

Chrześcijańskie przesłanie twórczości

Flannery O'Connor

Streszczenie: W niniejszym artykule Autorka omawia chrześcijańskie przesłanie opowiadań i powieści Flannery O'Connor. Korzystając z esejów umieszczonych w zbiorze *Misterium i maniery* autorka artykułu najpierw ukazuje kontekst powstawania twórczości O'Connor w epoce, która charakteryzowała się zarówno niewiarą, jak i poszukiwaniem Boga. Autorka stara się odpowiedzieć na pytanie, w jaki sposób O'Connor przekazuje ludzkie doświadczenie spotkania z Bogiem w sposób zarówno naturalny, jak i nadprzyrodzony, bez uciekania się do uproszczeń czy sentymentalizmu. Wprowadzenie to stanowi podstawę do analizy artystycznej wizji O'Connor, która koncentruje się na kwestii ludzkiego zbawienia. Autorka posługuje się kategoriami literackimi i filozoficznymi zidentyfikowanymi w tekstu O'Connor. Należą do nich tajemnica i faktura zdarzeń, habitus sztuki oraz lektura anagogiczna. Autorka bada również znaczenie groteski i humoru w chrześcijańskim przesłaniu O'Connor. Następnie na konkretnym przykładzie jej opowiadania *Trudno o dobrego człowieka* pokazuje, w jaki sposób obecne jest tu przesłanie chrześcijańskie.

Słowa kluczowe: O'Connor, wiara, prawda, czytanie anagogiczne, habitus sztuki

Flannery O'Connor's fiction conveys the Christian message implicitly and metaphorically¹. She does not seek to outline a religious doctrine or to strengthen faith. Thus, her works cannot be called apologetic. In her fiction, O'Connor does not explain the articles of faith or prove the existence of the supernatural. There is no pastoral or devotional bent in her writing, and it is not tainted – as she puts it – by a "pious cliché" (O'Connor 2014: 147), or "a parochial aesthetic and a cultural insularity" (O'Connor 2014: 144). Instead, her works bring a ferment to the traditional understanding of religion and religiousness; she shakes the complacency of Christians so that they come to realize what an actual religious fact is, even if – in the process – the frameworks within which they have learned to understand their faith are criticized and possibly shattered. Her short stories and novels reveal the harsh reality, full of cruelty and violence, that Catholics do not want to see in literary works, in the world around them, or in themselves. O'Connor's literary work reflects the reality of the lives of believers in a way that is so disturbing to believers that they are often disgusted and offended by her imagery. They cannot understand or accept her writing, even though, as I would argue, it is imbued with the spirit of Christianity.

¹ A literary text can convey a message in at least three ways: explicitly, implicitly, and metaphorically. A message is explicit when the author makes a direct value judgment about the world or human behavior. An implicit message is not directly stated; it is a matter of conjecture and interpretation. A metaphor is also indirect and requires a careful reading of the image offered by the author. The metaphor reveals some universal truth about the world or about human beings, which in turn exposes the anxieties of people of all times, albeit situated in different socio-political and cultural realities. See Głab 2016: 56–57.

Moreover, although O'Connor acknowledges a primarily Catholic worldview², she often describes Protestants. She is often, as she writes, closer to those “backwoods prophets and shouting fundamentalists” (O'Connor 2014: 207) than to the Christians who treat the supernatural as “an embarrassment and [...] religion [...] [as] a department of sociology or culture or personality development” (O'Connor 2014: 207). Her sympathies, then, are with all those who are religiously committed and who are bursting with religious fervor, even if it goes against the grain of sedate Catholicism.

In her opinion, these phenomena reveal the need for a religious community, the Church, in which spiritual experience can be channeled and find its fulfillment. This experience must be reflected in the life of the believer. This is so because, as Robert H. Brinkmeyer argues, following Frederick Asals, the religious asceticism in the Southern US has its roots in the requirement to choose between accepting Christ (and abandoning the world to follow Him) or denying Him (and choosing the sinful world) (Brinkmeyer 1996: 178-179; Brinkmeyer 1999: 27). The idea of this choice, this Christian realism, shines through the pages of O'Connor's prose as its dominant message.

In this article, I would like to discuss O'Connor's understanding of Christianity in her short stories and novels. I will first refer to some of the essays in the collection *Mystery and Manners* and then turn to her short story “A Good Man Is Hard To Find” as an example of conveying a Christian message in fiction.

I. An Unbelieving Age

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Flannery O'Connor's fiction is set in the 1950s and 60s, which she called “an unbeliefing age but one which is markedly and lopsidedly spiritual” (O'Connor 2014: 159). In her opinion, this definition of the era may imply that fiction depicts at least several types of modern man and his spirituality. The first of these types is aware of his spirituality, but he cannot associate it with a being outside himself. Therefore, he does not believe in the existence of God as his creator or master in whom he can trust. Instead, he believes himself to be a god, for which Algernon Charles Swinburne found the following expression: “Glory to man in the highest, for he is the master of things,” and which John Steinbeck confirmed in the following maxim: “In the end was the word and the word was with men” (O'Connor 2014: 159). The second type of person lacks the conviction of his divinity and the possibility of defining a divine being with the help of a doctrine and its dogmas, or accepting it through the sacraments. He lives with a sense of guilt, seeking a God who is inaccessible. The third type of person can neither believe in God nor endure unbelief. He, therefore, seeks a substitute for the lost God in his experiences and impressions.

According to O'Connor, our age has taught us to live with despair over the uprooting and loss of God. It is an age in which religion must be eradicated. She also argues that it is nevertheless an age of seekers and discoverers of God. However, the seekers of God are

² “She was Catholic born and raised in the (then) largely anti-Catholic South” (O'Donnell 2015: 4).

discovering a kind of sub-religion that cannot make the recognition of the revealed God clear and strong enough. O'Connor is convinced that many of the works of these seekers, even if they present significant religious values, cannot give the reader a sense of the most important spiritual experience, because a spiritual experience requires the establishment of a relationship with a Supreme Being, which is given in faith, even if faith is to be understood as "walking in darkness" (O'Connor 2014: 184). The experience of faith that O'Connor describes is thus "the experience of an encounter, of a kind of knowledge which affects the believer's every action. It is Pascal's experience after his conversion and not before" (O'Connor 2014: 160). How can O'Connor, as a Christian writer, share her own experience of "an unlimited God and one who has revealed himself specifically" (O'Connor 2014: 161) with the readers of her fiction? How can she convey the experience of man's encounter with God in a way that is both natural and supernatural? How can she do this without diminution or sentimentality, simply by examining the world as it is?

II. Mystery and the Texture of Events

Flannery O'Connor is aware of the challenge inherent in any attempt to present religious themes in prose. She argues that "[f]iction is the most impure and the most modest and the most human of the arts. It is closest to man in his sin and his suffering and his hope, and it is often rejected by Catholics for the very reasons that make it what it is. It escapes any orthodoxy we might set up for it, because its dignity is an imitation of our own, based like our own on free will, a free will that operates even in the teeth of divine displeasure" (O'Connor 2014: 192).

O'Connor thus points to the entanglement of prose with the ontic status of human beings, which is far from optimistic. Man is ontically, cognitively, and morally weak. Descriptions of his struggle with himself and the world, present in almost every form of prose, vividly remind us of this truth. O'Connor recognizes that a writer, even a Christian writer, cannot escape this truth about man and must find a way to reach all readers (Christian and non-Christian alike) through the artistic power of prose.

Therefore, she introduces elements of spirituality into her fiction, not explicitly, but by means of confronting her readers with the mystery of man and the world. She describes her characters as immersed in "what is eternal and absolute" (O'Connor 2014: 27), and thus with a sense of the mystery of their minds and actions, as well as the mystery of the world in which they live. In her opinion, every writer "operates at a peculiar crossroads where time and place and eternity somehow meet. His problem is to find that location" (O'Connor 2014: 59)³. The novelist, O'Connor notes, writes according to the nature of the world, that is, according to what he reads when "he's concerned with ultimate mystery as we find

³ This is related, according to O'Connor, to the local color of the Southern literature, which Henry Louis Mencken once referred to as "the Bible Belt." "In the South we have, in however attenuated a form, a vision of Moses' face as he pulverized our idols. This knowledge is what makes the Georgia writer different from the writer from Hollywood or New York. It is the knowledge that the novelist finds in his community" (O'Connor 2014: 59).

it embodied in the concrete world of sense experience" (O'Connor 2014: 125). O'Connor is convinced that, regardless of the progress of science, which aims to explain the most intimate areas of human life, it will forever remain a mystery, especially when we realize that we are beings within a certain created order. A Christian writer explores precisely the resonance between the laws of the created world and the mystery, and "what he sees on the surface will be of interest to him only as he can go through it into an experience of mystery itself" (O'Connor 2014: 41).

A Christian writer, then, should combine in his work two kinds of commitment. On the one hand, he must show the mystery, or rather his perception of it, but not in an abstract way. On the other hand, this mystery should be placed in the context of concrete events, psychological and social determinants, and, to use O'Connor's terminology, the so-called manners as conventions, the study of which leads to the existence of the mystery (O'Connor 2014: 103, 124–125). The Christian writer describes the manners and behavior of his characters taken directly from the texture of life and reality, and he does so "in the light of an ultimate concern" (O'Connor 2014: 29). He is "interested in what we don't understand rather than in what we do. [...] He will be interested in characters who are forced out to meet evil and grace and who act on a trust beyond themselves – whether they know very clearly what it is they act upon or not" (O'Connor 2014: 42). Thus, he does not focus on what is typical or visible at first glance, but on "the hidden and often the most extreme" (O'Connor 2014: 58), that which does not pass away, but lasts, reflecting the truth. However, to make the supernatural visible, the writer must first create a believable natural world, "for if the readers don't accept the natural world, they'll certainly not accept anything else" (O'Connor 2014: 116). By delving into his conscience, he creates a vision of truth coupled with moral judgment and has the conviction that these goals are inseparable. The morality of his work, as O'Connor puts it, echoing Henry James, "depended on the amount of 'felt life'" (O'Connor 2014: 146), and in the case of a Christian writer, life is felt according to the "the standpoint of the central Christian mystery: that it has, for all its horror, been found by God to be worth dying for" (O'Connor 2014: 146). The result of this feeling is a literature that does not separate mystery from manners and vision from judgment, or make the relative absolute. This literature is not "soggy, formless, and sentimental" (O'Connor 2014: 31), but radical in its illumination of vision and sharp in its diagnosis. What is the artist's vision? It is "a poverty fundamental to man" and "the experience of human limitation" (O'Connor 2014: 131). The poor of this world, who appear so often in her stories, become for O'Connor a symbol of the universal human condition. Her attitude is influenced by religious faith, which for her is "the engine that makes perception operate" (O'Connor 2014: 109), and helps her explore the world, "in which the sacred is reflected" (O'Connor 2014: 158). But does faith not limit the writer's perception to experiences available only to believers?

O'Connor is convinced that adherence to the dogmas of the faith does not limit the writer; on the contrary, "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" (O'Connor 2014: 31). She asserts that an artistic description of the world is credible only if it transcends the limits of the intellect and reveals the ultimate vision of reality. O'Connor openly admits: "I am no disbeliever in spiritual purpose and no vague believer. 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 what I see in the world I see in its relation to that" (O'Connor 2014: 32). Thus, she sees her protagonists "in the light of an ultimate concern" (O'Connor 2014: 29), which is Salvation. She makes no secret of the fact that she wants to write about the Church and Christ in her prose, even if she does not explicitly invoke them (O'Connor 2014: 155). Her intention is based on the conviction that each of us, whether writer or reader, has something in us "that demands the redemptive act, that demands that what falls at least be offered the chance to be restored" (O'Connor 2014: 48). The reader who explores her prose should be aware of the price of rebirth, which is impossible without the writer resorting to harsher means.

III. Grotesque, Deformation, and Humor

O'Connor emphasizes that writers who embrace a Christian worldview "have, in these times, the sharpest eyes for the grotesque, for the perverse, and for the unacceptable" (O'Connor 2014: 33). The reason for this, she believes, is the gap between the writer's views and those of his contemporaries, for whom "Redemption" is an empty word. The word no longer affects people as it used to, for example, in the Middle Ages, when people directed their thoughts and activities toward God. People today have become accustomed to living without thinking of God, so the goal of a Christian writer must be to shake their attitudes, beliefs, and feelings to make them see their weaknesses in the distorted mirror of the grotesque and deformed. According to O'Connor, 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" (O'Connor 2014: 34). A Christian writer sees an abomination in the modern world and must present it as such to all those who see it as something natural. Therefore, art is not meant to be a comfort, but a shock; therefore, it must be associated with uncomfortable feelings⁴. The artist's message should be treated as "a revelation, not of what we ought to be but of what we are at a given time and under given circumstances" (O'Connor 2014: 34). O'Connor is convinced that the writer should tell his stories with a message similar to the parable contained in the writings of St. Cyril of Jerusalem: "The dragon sits 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" (qtd. in O'Connor 2014: 35). In her opinion, a Christian writer should sensitize his readers to this "mysterious passage" (O'Connor 2014: 35) between two worlds: the visible and the invisible. He should make use of the real in a grotesque or even drastic way, and not be afraid of distortion (but not destruction) in the depiction of "maimed souls" (O'Connor 2014: 43), whereby "the truth is not distorted here, but rather, a certain distortion is used to get at truth" (O'Connor

⁴ See Kirk 2008: 335.

2014: 97–98, 162). The grotesque is thus meant to be a tool for the invisible world to penetrate the visible⁵.

When using the grotesque, the writer should be guided not by emotions but by intellectual and moral judgment to see and evaluate his characters correctly⁶. Therefore, he should not succumb to sentimentality or vague compassion⁷, as if he would forgive his characters their weaknesses. Sentimentality and compassion are extremes that emphasize man's innocence, which, as O'Connor realistically recognizes, was lost by man at the moment of his fall and redeemed by the death of Christ (O'Connor 2014: 147). In this sense, the contemplation of the most despicable evil must entail the greatest trust in God, who has redeemed the greatest sinner. Thus, the Christian novelist cannot fail to see evil: vulgarity, ignorance, greed, or the stupidity of man because "all of reality is the potential kingdom of Christ, and the face of the earth is waiting to be recreated by his spirit" (O'Connor 2014: 173). This means that "[t]he Catholic novel can't be categorized by subject matter, but only by what it assumes about human and divine reality" (O'Connor 2014: 196). O'Connor explains that the Catholic novel

[...] cannot see man as determined; it cannot see him as totally depraved. It will see him as incomplete in himself, as prone to evil, but as redeemable when his own efforts are assisted by grace. And it will see this grace as working through nature, but as entirely transcending it, so that a door is always open to possibility and the unexpected in the human soul. Its center of meaning will be Christ; its center of destruction will be the devil. (O'Connor 2014: 196–197)

Thus, a writer sees reality accurately when he can articulate the timeless experience of human nature: weakness, lack, unfulfillment, loss of soul, and when he is, therefore, able to show the resulting human drama. O'Connor is convinced that "the greatest dramas naturally involve the salvation or loss of the soul. Where there is no belief in the soul, there is very little drama" (O'Connor 2014: 167). The Christian writer, therefore, must recognize in all seriousness that sin is a rebellion against God and that it can determine man's future. This deadly seriousness about man's ontic condition and destiny "admits the maximum amount of comedy. Only if we are secure in our beliefs can we see the comical side of the universe" (O'Connor 2014: 167). The opposite attitude is seriousness without humor when the writer can justify every act of the protagonist, even the worst, by a relative scale of values.

⁵ "The clash of worlds, the incompatible that appears to defy either definition or correction, turns the reader toward a sense of the mysterious and unexplained. This occupation in the sense of mystery is O'Connor's territory" (Kirk 2008: 335).

⁶ O'Connor uses this approach in her novel *The Violent Bear It Away*, whose protagonist, Francis Marion Tarwater, is supposed to baptize his uncle's son, the handicapped Bishop. In portraying Tarwater, O'Connor uses the motif of deformity, but she also presents his grandfather as deformed, a mad religious prophet who saddles Tarwater with the task of baptizing Bishop. Her goal is to disturb the reader's emotions, to remind him or force him to understand what the sacrament of baptism really is, what a great mystery it is to welcome every human being, including a handicapped one, into the circle of God's children. According to O'Connor, the distortion that underlies the entire plot of the novel, and even the exaggeration (because Tarwater exaggerates the importance of his mission), is meant to serve a purpose. She argues that "This is not the kind of distortion that destroys; it is the kind that reveals, or should reveal" (O'Connor 2014, 162). See also the analysis of *The Violent Bear It Away* in: Ciuba 2011: 115–164.

⁷ O'Connor argues that compassion should be understood as "being in travail with and for creation in its subjection to vanity. This is a sense which implies a recognition of sin; this is a suffering-with, but one which blunts no edges and makes no excuses" (O'Connor 2014: 165–166).

IV.

Habitus of Art and Anagogical Reading

O'Connor is first and foremost an artist when she claims that "our final standard [...] will have to be the demands of art" (O'Connor 2014: 183). But what is an artist, and what is art? Following the French philosopher Jacques Maritain, O'Connor explains that an artist has (or should have) "the habit of art" (O'Connor 2014: 101, 64), that is, the state of mind, or even the habit of striving to create art and "a way of looking at the created world and of using the senses so as to make them find as much meaning as possible in things" (O'Connor 2014: 101). The search for meaning, in turn, must involve directing art toward truth both in content and style. She quotes St. Thomas Aquinas, who believed that "the artist is concerned with the good of that which is made" (O'Connor 2014: 65). A conscientious artist, including a Christian one, is concerned with the good of the text he creates. In order to arrive at the truth, even in the imaginative sense, that is, the truth that is not factual but possible, the author must work on his perceptive apparatus, because "the fiction writer begins where human perception begins" (O'Connor 2014: 67), where he can describe what he sees and not just formulate an abstract idea. The novelist must see "what is" (O'Connor 2014: 146), specific people with specific problems, and thus see "the texture of existence [...] concrete details of life that make actual the mystery of our position on earth" (O'Connor 2014: 69). Therefore, every novelist "has to remain true to his nature as one" (O'Connor 2014: 170), and a Christian writer must be all the more determined to fulfill his vocation to the best of his ability (O'Connor 2014: 170). He needs to write "for the good of what he is writing" (O'Connor 2014: 171) and serve "the truth of what can happen in life" (O'Connor 2014: 172). O'Connor's understanding of the Catholic novel is that it must first satisfy the demands of art. Writing a Catholic novel is not a matter of reproducing Catholic doctrine but depicting the "reality adequately as we see it manifested in this world of things and human relationships" (O'Connor 2014: 172) and thus coming closer to the contemplation of the "mystery as it is incarnated in human life" (O'Connor 2014: 176).

Thus, a novelist, especially a Christian novelist, should not try to approach eternity and mystery through the pursuit of a pure spirit separate from the matter because "fiction is so very much an incarnational art" (O'Connor 2014: 68), even if it also affects the reader through symbols resulting from the layering of details, endowed with a specific meaning that points the reader to something more. As O'Connor puts it,

in a good novel, more always happens than we are able to take in at once, more happens than meets the eye. The mind is led on by what it sees into the greater depths that the book's symbols naturally suggest. This is what is meant when critics say that a novel operates on several levels. The truer the symbol, the deeper it leads you, the more meaning it opens up." (O'Connor 2014: 71–72)

In this sense, O'Connor writes about anagogic seeing – which involves giving and receiving many different levels of reality in an image or situation – as part of the artist's

habitus. She refers to medieval thinkers who, while interpreting the Bible, distinguished three types of meaning in the sacred text: allegorical (relating one fact to another), tropological or moral (relating to the proper conduct), and anagogical⁸, which concerned “the Divine life and our participation in it” (O’Connor 2014: 72) and, therefore, amounted to seeing everything in the light of the absolute (O’Connor 2014: 134). According to O’Connor, an anagogical perspective should characterize every writer and all those who strive to see the world as a whole and as a cosmic order. This means that prose must give the reader a “sense of mystery deepened by contact with reality, and its sense of reality deepened by contact with mystery. Fiction should be both canny and uncanny” (O’Connor 2014: 79), and its aim should be, in Conrad’s words, “to render the highest possible justice to the visible universe” (Conrad 1914 qtd. in O’Connor 2014: 80)⁹, which, according to O’Connor, must also mean doing justice to the invisible universe. Thus, a novel written from an anagogic perspective presents itself quite differently, depending on “whether its author believes that the world [...] continues to come by a creative act of God, or whether he believes that the world and ourselves are the product of a cosmic accident” (O’Connor 2014: 156). In her view, the message of a novel is largely determined by whether the author “believes that we are created in God’s image, or whether he believes we create God in our own. It makes a great difference whether he believes that our wills are free, or bound like those of the other animals” (O’Connor 2014: 156–157). Therefore, O’Connor believes that to do justice to the world, which Conrad wrote about, is to do justice to the reality that is the source of the world in which we live since this visible world comes from the divine source; from the ultimate reality. However, while the writer perceives the world as good because of its origin in divine inspiration, he is also acutely aware of evil, which he understands as “a destructive force and a necessary result of our freedom” (O’Connor 2014: 157). He must portray the world without trying to smooth its edges or conform it to the wishful thinking of the pious.

Echoing St. Thomas Aquinas’ definition of art as “reason in making” (O’Connor 2014: 82), O’Connor, notes that art is not highly valued because irrational sources of knowledge have pushed aside reason. However, she believes that although the imagination has been separated from reason, which, as she believes, must bring about the end of art, each artist, especially one with Christian convictions,

uses his reason to discover an answering reason in everything he sees. For him, to be reasonable is to find, in the object, in the situation, in the sequence, the spirit which makes it itself. This is not an easy or simple thing to do. It is to intrude upon the timeless, and that is only done by the violence of a single-minded respect for truth.” (O’Connor 2014: 82–83)

O’Connor demands therefore that artists respect the factuality of the world, which must intersect with eternity, that is, mystery. The artist’s task, then, is “to contemplate experience” (O’Connor 2014: 84) or mystery that shines through the reality of the world.

⁸ The term *anagogia*, from Greek ἀναγωγή, means „going uphill“ or „leading uphill“ (H.G. Liddell, R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, entry: ἀναγωγή: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0057%3Aentry%3Da|nagwgh%2F> [25.11.2022]).

⁹ Cf. Conrad, Joseph 1914. “Preface.” In: *The Nigger of Narcissus*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page & Company. <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/17731/pg17731-images.html> [10.05.2024].

This means that the reader should see more than meets the eye in a literary text, but at the same time, the text should remain elusive because, as she argues, “in fiction two and two is always more than four” (O’Connor 2014: 102). According to O’Connor, a literary text must consist of at least three levels: a description of the characters’ adequate motivation, a plausible portrayal of the way of life, and theology, which consists of three themes: the Fall, the Redemption, and the Judgment (O’Connor 2014: 185). She claims that “the meaning of [...] story does not begin except at a depth where these things have been exhausted. The fiction writer presents mystery through manners, grace through nature, but when he finishes there always has to be left over that sense of Mystery which cannot be accounted for by any human formula” (O’Connor 2014: 153). Therefore, this sense of mystery must consist of a certain margin of understatement, for what would great literature be without understatement and elliptical endings?

V. Evil and Grace in the Short Story “A Good Man Is Hard to Find”¹⁰

O’Connor admits that the central theme of her prose is “the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil” (O’Connor 2014: 118). It is no different with the short story “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” which, as she confessed in an interview, was the only one she could read aloud “without busting out laughing”¹¹. Harold C. Gardiner points out that her short story is an unsentimental vision of the nature of sin and an occasion for O’Connor to ask whether the readers may share the grotesqueness of her characters (Cf. Gardiner 1966: 190–191; Gardiner 1999: 19). This grotesqueness suspends human existence between the natural and the supernatural, the explainable and the inexplicable. As Jordan Cofer argues, “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” “serves as a watershed story: some readers are horrified by the violence, while others are mystified by O’Connor’s ability to balance the theological with the absolute callousness of the serial killer, the Misfit” (Cofer 2014: 52). The story is the magnum opus of her anagogic style and one of her most famous short stories. It is a perfect introduction to O’Connor’s fiction because it represents themes and techniques common to her entire *oeuvre* (Cofer 2014: 52–53). It is brutal and sarcastic, and therefore difficult to read, because, as O’Connor notes “there is nothing harder or less sentimental than Christian realism” (O’Connor 1979: 90; qtd. in Cofer 2014: 53).

The protagonist of the story is a grandmother who travels to Florida with her son, daughter-in-law, and three grandchildren. She is portrayed in a grotesque manner that highlights her weaknesses and shortcomings. The grandmother is exceedingly tidy, well-organized, and at least apparently, morally upright. She cares for her loved ones, as a good person should, but the reader senses her shortcomings. For example, her concern for the

¹⁰ Kirk (2008: 76) discusses the origin of the title.

¹¹ Stanley Edgar Hyman (1966: 8) addresses this issue in his monograph.

family can be seen as a form of manipulation. The grandmother is annoying in her triviality, hypocrisy, and self-confidence, which allows her to tell her son, daughter-in-law, and grandchildren what to do and where to go. Equally disturbing is the fact that no one in the family pays any attention to her (or anyone else). They all live in their own worlds, like zombies, showing no awareness of each other's existence or point of view. Even the youngest in the family seem to be solipsists, with strong convictions that cannot be challenged by anything, like axioms (an example of this is the statement of her grandson, John Wesley, who knows what to think about different states: "Tennessee is just a hillbilly dumping ground [...] and Georgia is a lousy state too," O'Connor 1980: 4). Grotesque, in the sense of being at once comic and tragic, is their self-containment, as if in a cocoon of selfishness, their inner emptiness, and the "hostile deference" (Whitt 1997: 44) with which they treat each other. The grandmother's preoccupation with herself is grotesque (including the seriousness with which she treats herself, and smugly notes that if someone found her dead on the road, she would be dressed like a lady), as is her attitude toward colored people ("Oh look at the cute little pickaninny! [...] If I could paint, I'd paint that picture" O'Connor 1980: 35¹²). Grotesque is also her belief that "It isn't a soul in this green world of God's that you can trust" (O'Connor 1980: 38) and that "A good man is hard to find" (O'Connor 1980: 39)¹³, especially in the context of how she treats other people, failing to see them as persons worthy of respect (and demanding that others be good while failing to see the good in them). Her fear of the notorious Misfit, a local murderer, is grotesque. So is also her encounter with him in the depths of the forest, during which her entire family is killed. Before that happens, however, the grandmother tries to communicate with the murderer, and that is when the drama begins, as the author intended, because the woman is not fundamentally evil, and the reader does not wish her death¹⁴. But until she

¹² The incident with the black boy exposes the grandmother's character flaws. When June Star, her granddaughter, says the boy forgot to put on his underpants, the grandmother replies: "He probably didn't have any [...]. Little niggers in the country don't have things like we do." (O'Connor 1980: 35). As Kirk notes, this situation exposes the insensitivity of the grandmother, who is unable to understand the little boy's situation, to see him as a brother in Christ, someone with whom she is united in common humanity, and someone in need. The grandmother sees him only as a part of the landscape that could be included in a picture (cf. Kirk 2008: 76).

¹³ These words are spoken by Red Sam, but the grandmother agrees with him. In her interpretation of the short story's title, Kirk argues that the "good man" referred to in the title is the resurrected Christ himself: he seems difficult to find in the sense that "faith in the resurrection can be a difficult gulf for nonbelievers or agnostics to cross over [...]. Were it not for the resurrection, Christianity would not have been founded in the first place" (Kirk 2008: 76). The resurrection is an obstacle for many people that prevents them from believing in Jesus, as the Misfit himself suggests. However, the "good man" can also refer to followers of Christ. Kirk notes that because the Misfit is unable to take a leap of faith and believe in the resurrection of Jesus, life has no meaning for him and is a degenerate form of indulging in violence. By not believing, he is even incapable of being a good person as a follower of Christ. Therefore, as Kirk (2008: 76) concludes, "The truly devoted and ever faithful are just as hard to find as the belief in Christ's resurrection." The grandmother, Kirk argues, is a different case; she has found Christ, albeit superficially, but she is unable to find the "good man" in other people, that is, she is unable to see Christ in them, as Christianity requires. She only does so when the Misfit puts a gun to her head. Richard Giannone asserts that for O'Connor, the true goodness of the human being referred to in the title is not a psychological condition, but "a new reality," "a condition of spirit transformed by love after false claims dissolve," when all masks fall away and a person stops feeding on falsehoods (Giannone 1999: 45). This is why it is so difficult to find a good person when, as the grandmother's example shows, goodness can be revealed in them only moments before death.

¹⁴ As O'Connor notes, the grandmother is not a witch (see O'Connor 2014: 110), either, although she does have a cat, which she takes with her in her suitcase – to make her a truly grotesque character – for fear that "he might brush against one of her gas burners and accidentally asphyxiate himself" (O'Connor 1980: 34).

experiences the death of her loved ones, she does not understand the nature of good and evil (cf. O'Donnell 2015: 87).

What would O'Connor want us to pay the most attention to when reading this story? First of all, the fact that the elderly lady is facing death, which is the most difficult moment for any human being. After hearing the shots that took the lives of her family members, she tries to postpone her own death. She naively believes that the Misfit will not take the life of a lady, and that he is a "a good man" (O'Connor 1980: 41) from a good family. This assertion contradicts her earlier opinion that a good man is nowhere to be found, which implies an attitude of not seeing the good in others. Her "taste for self-preservation can be readily combined with the missionary spirit" (O'Connor 2014: 110) as she naively tries to convince him that he is not evil, even though her belief in his goodness and humanity seems questionable at first. O'Connor is convinced that the grandmother is no match for the Misfit's cunning, but in some ways, she surpasses him because she achieves "a special kind of triumph" (O'Connor 2014: 111). But what is her triumph?

O'Connor notes that the story's pivotal moment (pointing to its message) is when the elderly lady appeals to the supernatural order. Her attitude toward impending death belongs simultaneously to this world and the next. It transcends the natural order of behavior one would adopt in the face of death in her situation. Her argument: "If you would pray [...] Jesus would help you" (O'Connor 1980: 45) is a gesture that touches the mystery and therefore an event on an anagogical level, "the level which has to do with the Divine life and our participation in it" (O'Connor 2014: 111). This gesture seems so significant because the grandmother finally stops thinking about herself and turns her attention to the man who is about to kill her, recognizing her responsibility for him. In response to the Misfit's nihilism expressed in the words: "I found out the crime don't matter" (O'Connor 1980: 45), she whispers a prayer, invoking the help of Jesus Christ. Her only hope is that Jesus will help the Misfit, even though her words may sound to someone listening as if she were using his name in vain, i.e. saying "Jesus!" as one might say "Damn it!"¹⁵ What is about to happen must happen, even if no one knows why. This is the moment of grace's intervention in a world of violence and cruelty, which "is strangely capable of returning [...] characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace" (O'Connor 2014: 112)¹⁶. The Misfit realizes that if the activities of Christ were true, then "it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him" (O'Connor 1980: 46). The Misfit angrily declares that he regrets he was not present to witness the miracles performed by Christ: "It ain't right I wasn't there because if I had of been there I would of known" (O'Connor 1980: 46). It is then that grace works in the grandmother, who until then had been arrogant, trivial, and coarse. She touches the Misfit's shoulder and speaks to him as follows: "Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!" (O'Connor 1980: 46), as if God Himself were unexpectedly acting and speaking through her, thus addressing an evil son (Cf. Orvell 1991: 134). Miles Orvell argues that her gesture of touching the Misfit's arm may be read as a touch of Christ, who, as the Misfit puts it, has "thrown everything off balance" (O'Connor 1980: 45), if only because he commanded to love one's persecutors.

¹⁵ The author and the translator would like to express their gratitude to the reviewer for pointing this out.

¹⁶ As Kirk notes, the grandmother dies in a state of grace; her soul is protected in that one moment when her faith deepens and her focus expands beyond herself (Kirk 2008: 77).

The Misfit rejects this gesture of love ("as if a snake had bitten him" O'Connor 1980: 45), as if to deny the temptation, and returns the world to its natural order based on his own criminal rules.

O'Connor points out that the most exciting aspect of her story is in the "lines of spiritual motion" (O'Connor 2014: 113), that is, the unexpected moment of the action of grace in the grandmother's soul, which makes her see the Misfit not as an enemy but as someone who deserves mercy. It is at this point in O'Connor's story that the mystery enters the natural world. This violent and brutal scene becomes a channel for the flow of grace, for God's mercy is something that flows to everyone: to those who consider themselves righteous and to those who believe they are damned. The merciful look that the grandmother gives her murderer is something that she will unexpectedly take with her into eternity as she stands on the threshold of death. According to Margaret Early Whitt, this moment can also be read as the grandmother realizing how wrong she has been in viewing people through the lens of the artificial social hierarchy imposed on her by Southern tradition. She finally realizes that she is in no way better than anyone else, including the Misfit (see Whitt 1997: 47), who turns out to play a positive role. Although O'Connor does not want to see the Misfit as the devil¹⁷, she nevertheless argues that "the devil accomplishes a good deal of groundwork that seems to be necessary before grace is effective" (O'Connor 2014: 117). Without the encounter with evil, the grandmother would never have given in to grace and would not have counted the Misfit as one of her children for whom she felt responsible. Thus, she would not have felt united with other people. Perhaps that is why the Misfit says: "She would of been a good woman [...] if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life" (O'Connor 1980: 46). This may suggest that only under trial can a person demonstrate and even prove his goodness, which, in turn, may ultimately determine his salvation¹⁸.

In her short story, O'Connor portrays mystery through manners; she shows the crystal of eternity, whose light pierces the veil of this world, suggesting that all people are equal before God's merciful gaze and attention, for even the Misfit experiences a moment of grace when he states that "It's no real pleasure in life" (O'Connor 1980: 46), which may mean that meanness can no longer give him pleasure¹⁹.

¹⁷ According to Kirk, O'Connor perceives the Misfit as "a prophet gone wrong" because he seems to have a greater capacity for and susceptibility to faith than the grandmother, even though he does not believe in Christ (Kirk 2008: 77). His name (The Misfit) may imply that he is incapable of solving the problems he poses (cf. Kirk 2008: 78): "I call myself The Misfit [...] because I can't make what all I done wrong fit what all I gone through in punishment." (O'Connor 1980: 45). According to Irving Malin, the Misfit's fanaticism is similar to that of Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood* because he also "believes that things would be different if Jesus had really done what He said" (Malin 1966: 113–114; Malin 1999: 20). In contrast, Ruthann Knechel Johansen (1994: 37–38; 1999: 26) compares the Misfit to Job, who asks difficult questions of God himself and identifies with Jesus.

¹⁸ "O'Connor felt that only when that moment of ultimate violence is reached, that moment precisely and explicitly before death, are people their best selves" (Whitt 1997: 38).

¹⁹ "The movement from a deliberate desire to seek meanness as pleasure to an understanding that meanness is not a pleasure is a discernible difference. With the grandmother's death, the Misfit has been offered a 'moment of grace' as well" (Whitt 1997: 48). Orvell (1991: 133), on the other hand, is convinced that what the Misfit lacks is the vision of grace which he craves, "but the language in which he phrases his desire points to his implicit denial of the ongoing action of mercy, and, instead, fixes the redemptive act (Jesus' raising of the dead) in a single historical moment of time."

According to Flannery O'Connor, in her literary work, “our salvation is a drama played out with the devil, a devil who is not simply generalized evil, but an evil intelligence determined on its own supremacy” (O’Connor 2014: 168). Her fiction requires the readers to adjust their perception to see themselves and others as destined for Redemption through Christ. It shows grace through the prism of the natural and exposes man’s misery and inadequacy, or rather his “broken condition and, through it, the face of the devil we are possessed by” (O’Connor 2014: 168). O’Connor is uncompromising in revealing the truth about humanity, but she also communicates that truth in a restrained and nuanced way. Although she depicts human brutality, violence, and stupidity, her stories do not convey a nihilistic message. Nor do they offer naive comfort. O’Connor does not deprive her readers or her characters of hope, even as she realistically acknowledges human frailty. That hope and that realism, as the short story “A Good Man is Hard to Find” shows, open the way to God for every human being. O’Connor skillfully weaves this essential thought into her stories. Undoubtedly, the depth and allusiveness of O’Connor’s message pose a challenge to the intelligence and sensitivity of the reader, and the reader who defines himself as a Christian, sees in her fiction a mirror reflecting his face distorted by the grimace of sin, that is an image of the truth which he would rather avoid.

Translated by Miroslawa Buchholtz

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