

Strange Lands: Re-Imagining the Contributions of  
Flannery O'Connor in a New South

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of  
Arts at George Mason University

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Fall Semester 2016  
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## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to Mary Flannery O'Connor. *Requiescat in pace.*

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the many friends, professors, and family members who have made this thesis possible. I am indebted to my loving parents and brother for their tireless support. Drs. Anderson, Clark, and Harvey served as my director and committee members and gave invaluable feedback throughout the process. Finally, thanks to Art Taylor, Paul D'Andrea, and Alan Cheuse, who first set me on this path and always gave me words of encouragement to never stop writing.

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## **Abstract**

Title: STRANGE LANDS: RE-IMAGINING THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF FLANNERY O'CONNOR IN A NEW SOUTH

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George Mason University, Fall 2016

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This thesis describes the tendency to resort to analogical interpretations when analyzing the work of Flannery O'Connor and the need to introduce new categories and language in O'Connor studies amid changing understandings of southern culture. Following work begun by Patricia Yaeger in women's southern fiction, this thesis plumbs several aspects of O'Connor's work sometimes overlooked and deemed "strange," "weird," or "monstrous," namely her bizarre treatment of particular places, objects, and bodies. These areas serve as a three-pronged approach to draw out strange details and offer new ways of reading O'Connor without overemphasizing potentially religious or analogical aspects. In the process of researching and writing this thesis, the author conducted a search of reviews, literary criticism, and literary analysis related to O'Connor, pairing it with his own textual analysis. This thesis is intended as a culmination of the author's studies, an in depth analysis of O'Connor's overall work, and a personal tribute to O'Connor's influence in the art of short story writing.

## **Strange Lands: Re-Imagining the Contributions of Flannery O'Connor in a New South**

We have rather straightforward expectations when it comes to Flannery O'Connor and what can be found in her fiction — stories littered with use of the grotesque, themes of grace, and anagogical interpretations, just to name a few common readings. The aim of this thesis is to reimagine these expectations in a way that highlights the most powerful and intriguing qualities of O'Connor's stories. I want to take a step back from traditional readings of O'Connor, to create distance and gain perspective, to rebalance the scales that seem tilted toward her religiosity by drawing out her strangest details, objects, characters, and places. The “South” of O'Connor's setting continues to change economically, socially, geographically, and politically. It is evolving, and with it we have seen the emergence of New Southern Studies (NSS), an inclusive and interdisciplinary field that offers exceptional promise for generating the kind of balanced research O'Connor studies needs.

NSS is thriving in part because many are asking the questions that eschew the predictable party lines in favor of a greater reimagining of southern culture — what are the problems with regionalism, how can postcolonial theory be applied to southern studies, what is the global significance of U.S. southern culture? The collective goal of NSS is therefore to “relocate the US South within transnational, hemispheric, and global

frames.”<sup>1</sup> Rather than confining southern literature, history, and culture to comparisons against a northern other, NSS is seeking “alternative ways of linking place, culture, and identity.”<sup>2</sup> I propose that a similar shift, from the narrowly analogical to a fuller, interdisciplinary, multilevel view, is needed for O’Connor and would help to rebalance the load of theological commentary with the strange and mysterious details that litter her stories. Rather than limiting O’Connor to the confines of a “Catholic, southern writer,” a label which is partially her own creation but no longer sufficient or satisfying given expanding understandings of southern culture, her fiction deserves to be opened to new avenues of research and new language that can properly explore the diversity and density of southern literature in larger national, transnational, and global contexts.

When I open a story by Flannery O’Connor I encounter strange and powerful moments, characters that perplex, and places that defy any boundary, border, or feasible region. I find a world that in all its strange and glorious details borders on mythic and cosmic proportions. I find clouds the shape of turnips, raindrops the size of tin cans, tattoos and statues that confound and transfix, grandparents and children that almost haphazardly murder and are murdered. I find bodies that become centers of animated exchange, transferring vast amounts of energy. I find a world littered with things. I find explosions of such force that they crave for explanation. Then there is the isolation, retribution, obsession, pollution, destruction, ecology, economics, and mystery. In short, these are stories that seem to offer meaning that cannot be confined by geographic, economic, or political southern borders. And while O’Connor sets herself apart from so

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<sup>1</sup> Hutchison, 694.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 694.



many other southern authors, it seems at times that we have not taken the initiative to describe how she achieves such a strange and fantastical quality. Instead we retreat to the repeated refrains focused almost solely on O'Connor's faith, which does not always account for the strangeness of particular places, objects, and characters. O'Connor noted with regularity the intended aim of her stories. In a letter to friend Andrew Lytle, she explained, "There is a moment of grace in most of the stories, or a moment where it is offered and rejected." This includes the moment when the grandmother recognizes and reaches out to the Misfit in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," a "moment of grace [that] excites the devil to frenzy."<sup>3</sup> Yet when we focus too much on O'Connor's intended end we miss the strange ways in which she arrives there. Frankly her faith does not wholly account for the strange ways in which she leads up to these moments, how bodies, objects, and places seem to transform into one another and act beyond their natures. They become strange hybrids overshadowed by ideas of grace. O'Connor's stories become too familiar, their interpretations too mechanical. What they need is to be shaken up, to be seen as if for the first time, to let the strangeness that O'Connor's Catholicism alone cannot explain. I am convinced that if we could tell these strange stories in new ways, develop new language and categories to discuss them, then there would be an influx of imaginative research and study.

We should hear nothing, or at least say very little then, of grace or the grotesque, of the anagogical or the allegorical, in this analysis. We should admire instead the outlandishness of the stories and their grittiest details. We should attempt for instance, if

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<sup>3</sup> *Habit of Being* , 373.

we find it possible, to read O'Connor's stories in light of Native American Studies or the changing social geography of the South, exploring the implications of the blood-drenched sun or totem-like objects across multiple disciplines, instead of the purely religious implications. We should admire the subtlety with which O'Connor allows nature and weather to interact with her characters, the vivid colors and bodies that feel closer to cartoons than creatures, and the bodies that fall to the level of being treated as throwaways and trash. But how can we talk about these qualities in O'Connor's stories, what language can we develop to explore these avenues?<sup>4</sup> It is rare that a story captures for me the same mutable nature of O'Connor's places, objects, and bodies. One area, although far from O'Connor's Georgian roots, caught my attention: Native American creation legends. While the connection between the two may seem as surprising as O'Connor's own stories, I believe that they offer new and exciting ways to conceive of, discuss, and reimagine O'Connor's strangest moments.

In his anthology published earlier this year, "The Making of the American Essay," John D'Agata recalls the creation myth of the Cahto people, a Native American population indigenous to coastal California. According to the Cahto creation legends the world was methodically constructed by two deities in the sky and randomly washed away by a great flood. "But before they reconstruct the world they lost in their creation story, the Cahto make a point of lingering on the details of the flood's devastation," D'Agata writes, "noting how it methodically disassembled the world around them by erasing each

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<sup>4</sup> Patricia Yaeger in *Dirt and Desire* began the task of introducing new categories to reshape and analyze southern women's literature. She noted O'Connor's particular attention to animism, pollution, monstrosity, and mutilated bodies, areas that I hope to expand and use to communicate O'Connor's "strangeness".

part of it, piece by piece: the mountains, trees, birds, people, weather, dirt, and light.”<sup>5</sup>

D’Agata celebrates this as an example of the artist in the throes of creative power, an encounter of pure potential lying somewhere “between the given and the made,” between creation and nothingness. The Cahto legend goes on to tell of the transformation of the world’s bodies — whales became women, bull-snakes became black salmon, lizards became trout — and slowly the world was pieced back together, stitched as if from the very fibers of dirt, animals, and organic matter enveloping the world after the flood.

O’Connor’s fiction smacks of this same fantastical or even mythic quality, and the strangeness seems to flow from this kind of fusion. It is a world where bodies and places are torn apart and pieced back together. It is a world where bodies and objects become shape-shifters, transfixing those who come across them. Yaeger touches on the idea of “crossover objects” and bodies treated as objects that pass back and forth between black and white cultures. However O’Connor’s objects, bodies, and places do not merely transfer hands. They transfer states of being. This strange quality allows objects, bodies, and places to perform actions that they could not perform in a normal world. Places become actors intervening in the lives of characters or objects to be used; people become objects to be bought, owned, and sold; and objects become places and markers of social and revelatory significance. If we can use the inspiration of the Cahto legend to find new ways of looking at O’Connor’s stories, how many more ways might there be in addition to any religious or anagogical connotations? Religious though the stories may have been for O’Connor, it becomes increasingly difficult to argue that her stories follow the same

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<sup>5</sup> D’Agata, John. *The Making of the American Essay*, 3.

trends of other southern authors when its strange places, objects, and bodies are seen for what they are. Something else is taking place in O'Connor and it should not be held back by restrictive terms or categories.

O'Connor's stories linger on the details of the world's current and possibly future devastation, her places rise up to thwart and draw out desire, and each character appears stranger than the next. When I look at O'Connor in relation to this Cahto legend, I wonder: How would I describe O'Connor's version of crossover bodies and places? What similarities do they share? What are her types of totems and talismans? Could we read this as O'Connor's myth of southern re-creation and re-piecing? What fresh and more precise language can we give to O'Connor's stories? What we label as strange, weird, or perplexing cannot be simply attributed to her Catholic worldview. There is certainly more that we can say about them. Not only are her characters disassembled and worn down like the world of Cahto legend, but the bodies are stitched back together from the dense dirt, clay, and animals that surround them. It is a world thick with things, a world where bodies transform and places seem to orchestrate and envelope, a world where nature and bodies run together — in essence, a world similar to many legends and myths but now present in a new south filled with mysterious places, objects, and bodies.

In the beginning of "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," a story published in the *Kenyon Review* in 1953, O'Connor captures that strange and sometimes mythic quality that I have come to crave in her stories, encapsulating not only a sense of the southern fabric but a moment of potentiality involving creation and destruction, the earthly and the cosmic, the human and the impending unknown. Encroaching on Lucynell

Crater's farm, the enigmatic, one-armed Tom T. Shiftlet walks up the driveway and stops as Crater looks on perplexed:

The tramp stood looking at her and didn't answer. He turned his back and faced the sunset. He swung both his whole and his short arm up slowly so that they indicated an expanse of sky and his figure formed a crooked cross. The old woman watched him with her arms folded across her chest as if she were the owner of the sun... He held the pose for almost fifty seconds ... "Lady," he said in a firm nasal voice. "I'd give a fortune to live where I could see me a sun do that every evening."<sup>6</sup>

This unknown tramp who proves to be a con artist of sorts mysteriously arrives and mysteriously disappears. In his wake Shiftlet leaves the family worse off than when he first met them, and one of his only moments of potential redemption is captured by this dramatic staging and by this near cosmic interaction with the sun. Shiftlet becomes theatrical as he holds his pose. He draws attention to his mutilated arm, wishes to be seen as disabled or seen despite his disability. He wishes, in a sense, to purchase the land but must battle with the woman who we are told is "owner of the sun." O'Connor sets a strange stage with the actors given cosmic attendants, the premise of exchange and ownership is introduced from the outset, and we are able to witness the characters move toward their comedic or tragic end. In this light O'Connor becomes both a dramatist and tragedian allowing for strange turns and traumatic ends.

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<sup>6</sup> *Complete Stories*, 146.

This initial interaction with the sun comes full circle at the conclusion of the story, when Shiftlet has abandoned Lucynell Crater's daughter in a diner and decided to run off with the family car. Shiftlet finds himself not so much in a tug-of-war with himself and what he has done but grappling again with a cosmic and even atmospheric backlash. "A cloud, the exact color of the boy's hat and shaped like a turnip, had descended over the sun, and another, worse looking, crouched behind the car." The entire atmosphere changes. The weather itself seems to intervene as Shiftlet cries out. "Mr. Shiftlet felt that the rottenness of the world was about to engulf him. He raised his arm and let it fall again to his breast. 'Oh Lord!' he prayed. 'Break forth and wash the slime from this earth!' The turnip continued slowly to descend... there was a guffawing peal of thunder from behind and fantastic raindrops, like tin-can tops, crashed over the rear of Mr. Shiftlet's car."<sup>7</sup>

A purely anagogical reading of this passage might describe this encounter simply as a rejection of grace. The previously transformative sun is now cut off, and Shiftlet experiences life without its energy, without its influence. It might focus on the significance of the grotesque and Shiftlet's mutilated stub of an arm constantly present throughout the story or on Shiftlet's realization of the grace he has rejected while he strikes his breast. What then do we make of the "guffawing peals of thunder," the turnip shaped clouds, and tin can size raindrops? And the weirdness does not end there. The reader is confronted with perplexing characters like the young hitchhiker who unexpectedly shouts out "My old woman is a flea bag and yours is a stinking pole cat"

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 156.

and jumps out of Shiftlet's moving vehicle. Then there is the bartering for marriage and Crater selling her daughter to a complete stranger, Shiftlet's philosophical musings and tall tales, and his ability to teach a deaf, thirty-year-old woman her first word. These are the details that need to be brought back into the balance.

While J. Ramsey Michaels notes that Shiftlet does in fact desire the car more than Lucynell, he places the emphasis on the religious. "God has the last laugh," he says, noting the guffaw of thunder. The hitchhiker too is "nothing less than an exorcism." Even the road sign — "Drive carefully. The life you save may be your own" — is an allusion to the Gospel of Mark, he argues.<sup>8</sup> Everything becomes subject to the religious interpretation. Yet Michaels does not argue Lucynell Crater Sr., as a god-like figure even though she is the one described as "owner of the sun" and her land "visited off an on by various planets and by the moon." Timothy Basselin similarly argues the religious angle when he states that the "mysterious *realization* of Christ is what O'Connor's intimates in her fiction." The grotesqueness attached to disability and death finds its fulfillment in the "God-in-limitation." In other words, the meaning behind O'Connor's stories can be found in finding the presence of God in particular elements of her stories. But would we make such a connection if we never knew O'Connor was Catholic?

As essential as the "Catholic" readings are and as enthusiastically as O'Connor herself supported them, they are not as apparent as we might think. It is more often the case, knowing what we know about O'Connor today, that we habitually jump to the religious and anagogical interpretation due to the author's own suggestion, which

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<sup>8</sup> See Michaels' *Passing by the Dragon*, Chapter 8, for further biblical connections.

unsurprisingly has caused O'Connor research to be viewed as done and dusted. The results, as I have witnessed myself, are that students do not look beyond the spiritual, anagogical, or Catholic interpretation of the story. This is a sad state of affairs, to overshadow and disregard the peculiar moments in O'Connor's stories — the turnip shaped clouds and the almost antagonistic response of nature — because we have become all too familiar with the impulse to offer religious interpretations.

Flannery O'Connor wrote uncomfortable fiction, fiction that makes one cringe in their seat, laugh, and think all at the same time. Her humor is at the same time both pleasing and unsettling, and her characters and places shock the reader out of complacency and leave them mystified. O'Connor's characters find themselves in places that consume, threaten, digest, absorb, mystify, and corrupt. Bodies are absorbed, transacted, transformed, discarded, and covered in dirt. Yes, her characters are often presented with a choice to receive or reject grace, as many have rightly noted before, but to limit her writing to tales of grace rejected or grace received is no longer sufficient. The strange encounters, characters, and places at the heart of O'Connor's stories are overshadowed by people's perceptions of her religious sensibilities. How then to communicate O'Connor's most intriguing and powerful details rather than burying them under cursory readings?

### *New Roads, New Language*

Among the categories dominating O'Connor studies, we know the myriad of terms commonly thrown around when analyzing her stories: grace, grotesque, anagogical, evil,



violence, symbolism, parable. It is time to take the dirt back roads and explore the twisted paths leading to strange vistas, mystifying objects, and unforgettable characters that make me see Mary Flannery O'Connor as if for the first time. Given the tendency of places, bodies, and objects to intertwine and transform into each other, they will serve as the example analyses in this thesis and offer new angles by which we can view not only O'Connor but also the ever-evolving understanding of the "South". What follows is an attempt to bring to light the strange ways in which these aspects interchange and transform.

Whereas O'Connor has been primarily thought of as a southern and regional writer, her places bear an attempt to tap into an energy that transcends any local region or boundary. In my section on place, I will draw out the strange ways that weather and nature mysteriously rise to a reactive and even proactive state, heightening or thwarting a character's desire, at times covering, burying, and desecrating bodies in dirt and soil churned up amid the violence and trauma. These places comprise a world where the earth itself is undergoing trauma, and like bodies is being gutted, bled, and rooted out, bearing an ecological concern in terms of both agriculture and pollution.

When addressing O'Connor's mysterious objects it is important to note how her world is full of "things," strange objects that confound and perplex. These objects act as totems, tikis, and talismans. They become trophies of monstrous acts, yet they are set apart from what we could call the grotesque. O'Connor allows these objects to gain an entrancing and alluring force. These objects necessarily lead to the third area of O'Connor's treatment of bodies. These bodies become transfixed and isolated. They are

marked, scarred, tattooed, and singled out by themselves or their own communities. They are thrown away or discarded as pollutants. They have been transformed into labor-obsessed bodies that are negotiated, transacted, and owned, and bodies that become “workable,” shaped constantly by place, nature, and weather. In O’Connor’s most outlandish moments, the bodies and objects act as centers of high-powered exchange, receiving and transferring vast amounts of frenetic energy from and to other objects, places, and people.

But if southern literature in general has been more concerned with a history of place and trauma, O’Connor shifts her concern to the present and the future, turning her characters into orators and vehicles that persistently tell stories, concerning themselves with retribution, with what can be known and who can be trusted, as characters hesitate, resist, question, interrogate, and cross-examine, asking ‘Who is real?’ ‘Can they be trusted?’ and ‘What does the *other* deserve?’ If this is not enough you could say that O’Connor’s stories not only transcend regional limits, but they also take on a mythic and fable-like quality in their eccentricity, revealing crossover objects and hybrid and animalistic bodies that remind me of the narrative quality of the Cahto creation legend.

It would be easy to apply O’Connor’s theological attitude to any of these categories. We could look at her treatment of bodies as an emblem of the corruption of sin and the rejection of grace. We could pull a microscope over her regional writing and draw comparisons to biblical tales through scriptural exegesis like J. Ramsey Michaels’ book *Passing by the Dragon*. We could even analyze the captivating objects littered throughout O’Connor’s stories and discuss her sacramental view of writing as Lake and

Enjorlas have done. In this sense, I am not openly disagreeing with those who explore the potential religious connections in O'Connor's fiction. Rather I am hoping to show clearly that their anagogical view is not the only reading possible and so will point out where their inquiries could be stretched further.

## **Dirty Desires: Place and Animism in O'Connor**

In the words of Patricia Yaeger, “place is never simply ‘place’ in southern writing” and for Flannery O’Connor it gains a “weird animistic force.”<sup>9</sup> This force reaches a fever pitch in O’Connor’s stories. Her woods and landscapes, skies and soil, are bubbling with a kind of force different from other southern authors. O’Connor is concerned with the acts of trauma that happen in the present and the threat of future calamity. This makes her in many senses a futurist who sees where certain paths can lead and a fortuneteller who echoes the inevitable fate of her characters in the places around them. As a result, these places abstain from the nostalgic looking into the past, the Civil War-riddled, history-bound, geographic sense of the “South”. Place instead encapsulates all matter from the dirt to the clouds and every force in between. It is ecological, and it becomes animistic — meaning that the trees, skies, weather, and all organic and inorganic elements comprising place seem to possess a power or force entirely their own. These elements can act of their own accord, can fight back, and can evolve into a place never before seen or heard of. They achieve a strange omniscience and intervene in the lives of the characters. So it is not simply a “weird animistic force,” but it is a refining, purifying force for the characters or at the very least a force that thwarts and disrupts. For O’Connor, place is no longer

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<sup>9</sup> Yaeger, 13, 22.

stagnant and submissive. It is a force that has the unique ability to unmask desire, to delve into the characters themselves, and rip out their deepest needs and wants.

In Barbara Ladd's essay "Dismantling the Monolith: Southern Places — Past, Present, and Future," she questions whether or not place can take an active role, can become animistic, imbued with a life-force that emerges dynamic, vital, and at times even meddling:

Is place or the "sense" of it to become something phantasmagoric? Must the sense of place refer only to something lost and longed for, like the longing for presence in language? Must it refer only to a locus of desire, or can a phantasm, can desire, *do* anything? Is there any sense in which place can *function*, can become *viable* or even *dynamic* and *vital*, a *vehicle* or *engine* for *desiring*...?<sup>10</sup>

I see Ladd questioning whether place itself can become a type of character or at least a serious actor within the story that both acts as a locus of desire and also begins to instigate and encourage it. Central to that question though is how that place functions, its connection to desire, and its ability to act as a vehicle of that desire. Yaeger notes four "ways in which southern characters inhabit space,"<sup>11</sup> and to that I would add a fifth: revelatory animism. In looking more closely at O'Connor's use of place, we find that place is brought to life and used to unveil or reveal characters, their desires, and their trauma. This revelatory quality can cause an escalation or intensification of a character's desire or the trauma currently taking place. We will see that O'Connor's characters not

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<sup>10</sup> Ladd, 56.

<sup>11</sup> Yaeger discusses these four ways of occupying southern space – Reverse Autochthony, Landscapes of Melancholy or Occluded Sadness, White Detritus, and Southern Geographies – in *Dirt and Desire*, Chapter 1, pp. 15-24.

only struggle to satiate their deepest desires, but her places find a way to adopt and eventually pull out those very desires buried within the character. Then, in some of O'Connor's best moments, those places can proceed to thwart, swallow, unhinge, transform, and fight back against the desires that emerge from those same characters. This process is traumatic and, as will be seen in later sections, leaves characters marked, scarred, and damaged. What is even more fascinating is how this trauma is constantly absorbed into the living landscape, giving greater shape to characters' desires.

### *Absorbed Trauma*

Trauma is a delicate balance in O'Connor's work. Each character seems to be teetering on some possible change, and for O'Connor that change, whether good or bad, is the essence of their trauma and in many cases their identity. Hulga in "Good Country People" identifies herself so closely with the trauma of her lost leg that she changes her name to the ugliest one that she can think of, "Hulga." She views her disability as ugly and an affliction, and so her name must reflect that identity. Yet the trauma played out in O'Connor's stories is more often psychological or social trauma — Hulga has her leg stolen and is abandoned by Pointer, Shiftlet similarly abandons Lucynell in the diner, and the grandmother's family is separated from her in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." Although these moments are closely associated with pain, suffering, or death, it is the act of abandonment, isolation, or exile that causes the real psychological and social trauma in the characters. But why does place seem to absorb trauma in O'Connor's stories, to what end — is it hoping to assuage or alleviate the pain of the characters, reflect their

suffering, save them from their agony?<sup>12</sup> Where trauma is often presented as personal and therefore more difficult to relate to, O'Connor presents trauma as something that can be absorbed and not only related to but unraveled, re-pieced, and enlarged like the creatures of the Cahto legend.

Many have argued for the promise of salvation in O'Connor's most traumatic and violent passages. Gary Ciuba notes that O'Connor's own comments on the salvific nature of violence only help to contribute to narrow analogical readings. "Through shocking reversals, sensational events, and grotesque characters, O'Connor hoped to bear readers away so that they might recognize the mystery to which they were usually opposed or indifferent."<sup>13</sup> Ciuba is not alone in continuing to explore the analogical and spiritual implications of O'Connor's traumatic scenes. Many excellent works have emerged in recent years, including Avis Hewitt and Robert Donahoo's edited volume of essays, *Flannery O'Connor in the Age of Terrorism: Essays on Violence and Grace*, Robert Evans's recently edited work, *Critical Insights: Short Fiction of Flannery O'Connor*, and Joshua Pederson's most excellent exploration of literary infanticide, *The Forsaken Son: Child Murder and Atonement in Modern American Fiction*. Yet all these great works still buy into the traditional party line, largely analyzing O'Connor's religious and spiritual interpretations, which seem to create a rather divisive scenario: one is either on O'Connor's side and agrees with her candid explanations of grace, violence, and the grotesque, or one is forced to merely let O'Connor have her say and allow her work to remain a neatly packed box of eccentric and odd, albeit religious, stories.

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<sup>12</sup> Yaeger in Chapter 1 of *Dirt and Desire* explores trauma "absorbed into the landscape".

<sup>13</sup> Ciuba, 156.

The potential is there. While Pederson uses his book to reconcile the “vocabularies of infanticide and Christianity” among six modern authors including O’Connor, his subject matter could be broadened to analyze O’Connor’s place in the larger context of child sacrifice in the Americas. This offers the opportunity to step back gradually from the anagogical readings and also present a larger national and transnational context for O’Connor’s work. Similarly, Hewitt notes the quantifiable discrepancy taking place between theological and non-theological considerations on O’Connor and includes for instance Jon Lance Bacon’s essay “Gory Stories: O’Connor and American Horror,” a larger look at O’Connor’s place among both literary and horror film traditions.<sup>14</sup>

I think there is room to look at instances of infanticide or violence beyond the religious or anagogical. I think there is an opportunity to unpack the trauma taking place and how in strange ways it leads to a revelation of desire. But before we go any further it is necessary to look at what O’Connor’s sense of trauma might mean. It seems that in her stories trauma is not simply a disturbing or grotesque experience, but it is any little observable event, comment, or image that causes change. Trauma can therefore be as simple as riding a train for the first time as seen through Nelson’s eyes in “The Artificial Nigger,” a backhoe tearing up the ground as in “A View of the Woods,” or a son snidely commenting on his mother’s hat as happens in “Everything That Rises Must Converge.”

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<sup>14</sup> Hewitt also notes Katherine Hemple Prown’s *Revisiting Flannery O’Connor: Southern Literary Culture and the Problem of Female Authorship*, Jon Lance Bacon’s *Flannery O’Connor and Cold War Culture*, and Sarah Gordon’s *Flannery O’Connor: The Obedient Imagination* as books that have helped to begin balancing the scales that lean heavily in favor of theological approaches to O’Connor.



I would argue then that the analogical view is not necessarily wrong but that a deeper level of complexity is present in stories like “A Good Man Is Hard to Find.” O’Connor’s stories cannot be contained to the grotesque or the formally religious. In her stories the quotidian, agricultural, and passing events of strange southern characters bear the same weight, if not more so, as the thefts, abandonment, and murder they eventually lead to. I would go a step further and argue that places and characters in O’Connor’s stories more often than not constitute a utilitarian and symbiotic relationship where trauma is a sign of an exchange, whether absorbed, drawn out, or plucked, between place and person.

Of all O’Connor’s stories, none is more famously traumatic than “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” first published in the anthology *Modern Writing I* in 1953. The story, which focuses on the tragic journey of a grandmother and her dysfunctional family from Atlanta to Florida, remains O’Connor’s most widely anthologized work. In an ironic foreshadowing at the beginning of the story, the unnamed grandmother waves a newspaper at her son insisting she would never take her family to Florida if she knew there was an escaped convict on the loose. Sure enough, when the family car ends up in a horrible accident just outside Toombsboro, Georgia, they are met by a “big black battered hearse-like automobile” with the escaped “Misfit” inside. The ensuing trauma is felt most keenly by the grandmother who watches her son, daughter-in-law, and three grandchildren taken into the woods and presumably shot one at a time. But before this can happen, the space that O’Connor places her characters in begins to absorb and adopt

the impending trauma: “Behind them the line of woods gaped like a dark open mouth.”<sup>15</sup> The space begins to open up to consume the coming tragedy. Here, place and character begin to merge. It not only foreshadows the coming trauma, but the “dark open mouth” prepares to digest it.

With this interchange, trauma is no longer something experienced by individual characters. It is something transferred, reflected, and consumed by the surrounding landscape. This is the first way in which place is given an animistic character, a sign of life or force suggesting that it is more than simply place. A similar absorbing effect takes place in “The Life You Save,” as was noted earlier, when Shiftlet approaches the Crater farm and stages himself against the backdrop of the sun: “He turned his back and faced the sunset. He swung both his whole and his short arm up slowly so that they indicated an expanse of sky and his figure formed a crooked cross.”<sup>16</sup> Here the trauma of Shiftlet’s amputated arm is both absorbed but more importantly unveiled. Instead of simply presenting his arm or having Crater inquire about it and how he could fulfill farming duties with only one good arm, O’Connor uses the land to unveil Shiftlet’s disability. Shiftlet himself also seems to be using place to reveal his disability, presenting the parts of his body (and perhaps soul) that he is willing to lose in order to gain the land. It has the effect of relieving, unveiling, and even intensifying the significance of Shiftlet’s trauma and desire. “I’d give a fortune to live where I could see me a sun do that every evening,” Shiftlet tells Crater. It is the sun and place itself that seeks to unveil the desires and trauma of O’Connor’s characters. Is it really the car that Shiftlet desires or does he desire,

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<sup>15</sup> *Complete Stories*, 127.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

though never stating it, to be seen beyond his disability? When Shiftlet drives off with everything he wants, the car finally in his possession, there is still the feeling of being without. The car does not satisfy Shiftlet's desire. He is subsequently abandoned by the hitchhiker he picks up, and the clouds descend over the sun blocking it out. Yet what is still seen in the final sentence of the story is Shiftlet's "stump sticking out the window."<sup>17</sup> He is racing away from the revelatory power of the sun and the cleansing force of the storm. He is unable to satiate his desire and to come to terms with his disabled body.

Moreover, we find in many of O'Connor's stories that place itself is undergoing its own kind of physical trauma as land is gouged, beaten, plucked, struck, mutilated, gorged, and violated, just as much as the characters populating these spaces. This is not a mere reflection of the suffering and desire that takes place within the characters. It is a practical sharing of that experience as if place is observing and feeling the same trauma. But what does it mean for trauma to be shared between these participants, and how can this relationship unmask buried desire?

### *"All-Consuming" Agriculture*

We must also address the fact that a majority of O'Connor's stories take place not only in a southern setting but they take place within a routinely agricultural context. In this way trauma becomes intricately attached to place. O'Connor's southern places are "routine" because they are dominated on a day to day basis by agriculture, commerce, dirt and land, by who owns it, farms it, decides what (or even who) goes into the ground and

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 156.

subsequently what comes out of it. These are the thoughts and actions that consume the lives of these southern inhabitants to the point that they are constantly described with agricultural, naturalistic, and labor-related language. Crater is portrayed as a woman “the size of a cedar fence post”<sup>18</sup>, Parker’s wife in “Parker’s Back” has a face tight “as the skin on an onion”<sup>19</sup>, and Mrs. Shortley in “The Displaced Person” stands on two legs with the “self-confidence of a mountain,” a torso like “narrowing bulges of granite,” and eyes like “two icy blue points of light.”<sup>20</sup> Similarly many of O’Connor’s stories take place, at least in part, on farms, including “The Life You Save May Be Your Own,” “A View of the Woods,” “The Enduring Chill,” “Parker’s Back,” “The Displaced Person,” and “Revelation,” among others. Surrounded by this routinely agricultural space, O’Connor’s characters become obsessed with place and, more precisely, what the dirt from that place can do for them. However it is the obsession with place and land that often leads trauma.

No story demonstrates this better than “A View of the Woods.” Hoping to take a twisted sort of vengeance on his dreaded son-in-law, the elderly Mark Fortune seeks to sell off the land on which his son-in-law, daughter, and grandchildren live and make their living. The land itself becomes both a source of tension and a locus for Fortune’s desired vengeance. The story opens with Fortune and his favorite granddaughter, Mary Fortune Pitts, ritually observing the construction equipment “gorging” on the dirt and clay. While Fortune sees the potential for “progress” in his land and claims that “[any] fool that

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 510.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 194.

would let a cow pasture interfere with progress is not on my books,”<sup>21</sup> Mary acts differently. She is protective of the land and shouts that ““If you don’t watch him...he’ll cut off some of your dirt!”<sup>22</sup> This contrast sets up the main conflict in the story. Soon the dirt begins to embody both Fortune’s desires and the suffering that Mary and her grandfather must undergo.

It seems, for O’Connor, that where trauma is there also desire will be. Notice how O’Connor’s characters cry out. They weep, wail, shout, curse, bellow, and howl. Mary Fortune Pitts yells warningly about the dirt. The grandmother in “A Good Man” cries out to the Misfit “You’re one of my own children!” In “Revelation”, Mrs. Turpin roars into the sky “Who do you think you are?” This is not mere dramatization; it is desire being oozed out, being allowed to finally flow from lips and limbs and tongues. And each time it is closely seen in relation to the ability of place and land to absorb, consume, and digest. Mary Fortune Pitts is watching the backhoe consume the soil. The grandmother has watched her family taken into the woods. Mrs. Turpin cleans the dirt off her hogs and watches the sky burn with a “transparent intensity” as she is enveloped in a vision of nature and the heavens. These are not passing moments where characters merely exclaim. They are significant, traumatic escapes of buried impulses and passion.

Fortune’s murder of his granddaughter is another example of buried desire being forced out. He initially desires to create as much misery for his daughter and son-in-law as they have for him. This vengeance is intensified further by the fact that the son-in-law regularly beats Fortune’s favored granddaughter, Mary, and Fortune’s daughter (Mary’s

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 335.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 338.

own mother) does nothing to stop her own daughter's abuse. The characters take their turns bellowing their displeasure. Fortune then becomes so consumed by the idea of "his land," wanting to sell it so that it can become gas stations and strip malls and be taken away from his son-in-law. Yet Fortune thinks of nothing but his desire to sell the land and in the process alienates his own granddaughter who does not want to see "the lawn" sold and her view of the woods from the porch disappear. The dirt of the land, which comes to thoroughly represent place in this story, becomes the central focus for Fortune and colors all of his thoughts and desires. His true desires slowly begin to be revealed by this "dirty" language. When he thinks of his granddaughter, she is "thoroughly of his clay"<sup>23</sup>. When he thinks of his daughter and son-in-law, it is only to recall that "they were waiting impatiently for the day when they could put him in a hole eight feet deep and cover him up with dirt"<sup>24</sup>. When he looks at his granddaughter, her hair is not simply hair but "very fine, sand-colored hair—the exact kind he had had when he had had any"<sup>25</sup>. In fact, the sale of "the lawn" becomes the issue that divides Fortune and his granddaughter, even leading her to call him "the Whore of Babylon" and run away in anger. Both Fortune and Mary are then led to extremes to protect what they view as their land. Fortune refuses to reconsider the sale of the land, knowing it will alienate the only relative who remotely cares for him anymore, and Mary continues to deny that her father beats her and even beats her grandfather for having suggested that she would allow

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 338.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 337.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 339.

herself to be beaten by any man. Both Fortune and Mary allow their desire to sell and protect the land respectively to trump any desire they have to maintain their relationship.

In her final act of defiance, Mary claims she is “PURE Pitts,” has no Fortune in her blood, and effectively severs her connection with her grandfather. Land, desire, and trauma are so intertwined by the end of the story that Fortune retaliates in a fit of rage and kills Mary by slamming her head against a rock. He beats her with the land he is so desperate to be rid of. It is no wonder then that Fortune’s resulting heart attack and revelation following his murderous action come as a manifestation of the land. As he lies on his back in pain, the land opens up before him:

[Fortune’s heart] expanded so fast that the old man felt as if he were being pulled after it through the woods, felt as if he were running as fast as he could with the ugly pines toward the lake. He perceived that there would be a little opening there, a little place where he could escape and leave the woods behind him. He could see it in the distance already, a little opening where the white sky was reflected in the water. It grew as he ran toward it until suddenly the whole lake opened up before him, riding majestically in little corrugated folds toward his feet. . . . On both sides of him he saw that the gaunt trees had thickened into mysterious dark files that were marching across the water and away into the distance. He looked around desperately for someone to help him but the place was deserted except for one huge yellow monster which sat to the side, as stationary as he was, gorging itself on clay.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 356.

Each sentence is marked with the presence of place. Fortune's vision is populated with trees, water, lakes, pines, sky, clay, and woods, and his final glimpse of the construction equipment "gorging itself on clay" shows that place has transformed from the object of his desire into something monstrous that can absorb, swallow, and take on his resulting trauma. Like the revelatory and mechanical excavators, something has stripped all that Fortune once identified himself with, including the granddaughter that was so thoroughly of "his clay."

For southern writers, the focus on dirt becomes an immense symbol for racial and class barriers, often becoming, like Fortune, an obsessive component of a character's behavior. This exuberant dirt obsession becomes quickly associated with "pollutants" and wanting to be rid of "trash". Yaeger suggests that "[w]e can construct a surprisingly orderly map among southern women writers of literary approaches to pollution behaviors. First, there are characters who are demented about dirt, hypersensitive about crossing pollution barriers, and adamant about the sacrosanct status of their own class or race."<sup>27</sup> In O'Connor's "Revelation" Mrs. Turpin cannot tear herself away from her obsessive thoughts about dirt, pollution, and trash:

Sometimes, at night when she couldn't go to sleep, Mrs. Turpin would occupy herself with the question of who she would have chosen to be if she couldn't be herself. If Jesus had said... "There's only two places available for you. You can either be a nigger or white-trash"... She would have wiggled and squirmed... and finally she would have said, "All right, make me a nigger then—but that don't

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<sup>27</sup> Yaeger, 260.



mean a trashy one.” And he would have made her a neat clean respectable Negro woman, herself but black.<sup>28</sup>

Turpin’s obsession with dirt, pollution, and trash blinds her to her own racial insensitivity and repulsive nature. She cannot see how someone could call her an “old wart hog from hell,” and it will require a revelation of the land to make her see it in the end.

In other stories, we encounter characters who must be cast aside as polluting influences or ritually excluded due to the filthiness of their desires or behavior. This exclusion is a psychologically and socially traumatic experience that also carries the pattern of being closely attached to dirt and land. Here again dirt and pollution is tied to trauma and place. Place has been noted previously to absorb or undergo trauma, yet here it can be seen to transform and magnetize it. And while “A Good Man” and “A View of the Woods” demonstrate a place’s ability to swallow, absorb, and reflect the physical trauma, stories such as “The Life You Save” and “Parker’s Back” show that land is tied to and can even amplify psychological and social trauma.

O.E. Parker’s wife in “Parker’s Back,” published posthumously in *Esquire* in April 1965, regularly voices her disgust at her husband’s tattoos. She sees them as “trash” and a pollutant. When Parker comes home with a tattoo of God on his back she pretends to not even recognize him and eventually banishes her husband who she feels is a corrupting idolatrous force ruining her good Christian life. Yaeger notes that this kind of ritual exclusion is a result of another group of dirt-concerned, pollution-obsessed people like Mrs. Turpin: “Alongside the pollution-obsessed we encounter a second group of

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<sup>28</sup> *Complete Stories*, 491.

characters whom God-fearing citizens abhor. Unkempt, disorderly, or simply outside their designated territory, these polluting characters must be killed or ritually excluded.”<sup>29</sup> Enter O’Connor’s isolated bodies, which will be dealt with in greater detail later. For now, it is important to see how place itself is closely tied with this traumatic isolation. When Parker is beaten by his wife with a broom and chased out as if he were a pile of dust and dirt that needed to be swept away, he settles himself on the ground beneath the tree:

[S]he grabbed up the broom and began to thrash him across the shoulders with it... Then he staggered up and made for the door. She stamped the broom two or three times on the floor and went to the window and shook it out to get the taint of him off it. Still gripping it, she looked toward the pecan tree and her eyes hardened still more. There he was—who called himself Obadiah Elihue—leaning against the tree, crying like a baby.<sup>30</sup>

It is not enough for Parker’s wife to beat him or run him out of the house, but she must remove the “taint” of him from the broom lest she bring it back into the house. The sense of dirt or trash to be swept out intensifies the trauma of isolation and adds significance to Parker’s desire to be accepted. As a result Parker retreats to the land, which becomes a new home, a place very much of new birth, and embraces him in a way his wife would or could not. Instead of consuming Parker’s trauma the pecan tree represents the land’s ability to magnify and assuage his trauma by accepting him “like a baby.”

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<sup>29</sup> Yaeger, 262.

<sup>30</sup> *Complete Stories*, 529, 530.

With Shiftlet in “The Life You Save,” we see that the land can reveal trauma and desire can even be magnetized, almost pulled out by the effects of the sun. When he strikes a bargain with Crater to farm the land and repair the house for food and a place to sleep, he is given the broken down truck as his bed: “‘I told you you could hang around and work for food,’ she said, ‘if you don’t mind sleeping in the car yonder.’ ‘Why listen, lady,’ he said with a grin of delight, ‘the monks of old slept in their coffins!’”<sup>31</sup> The result is that Shiftlet’s desire, the car, will only be achieved then through his cultivation of the Crater land. In this sense, the land begins to draw him closer to his desire, and his liberation is seen not through grace but through dirt and agriculture. It will be the farming that allows him a livelihood and the possibility of fixing and eventually stealing the family car.

In “Revelation,” the land continues to amplify and fight against Mrs. Turpin’s desire as it causes her to undergo the trauma of revelation. As Yaeger points out, Turpin’s dirt-obsession and fixation on class and racial divides extends even to her pigs. When Mrs. Turpin returns to her farm to clean the pigs, she ponders how someone could possibly call her an “old wart hog from hell.” It is at this point that the land swarms up and envelops her in a revelation:

The color of everything, field and crimson sky, burned for a moment with a transparent intensity. The question carried over the pasture and across the highway and the cotton field and returned to her clearly like an answer from beyond the wood...Until the sun slipped finally behind the tree line, Mrs. Turpin

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 149.

remained there with her gaze bent to them as if she were absorbing some abysmal life-giving knowledge...<sup>32</sup>

Turpin's true nature is revealed by the land and she senses an impending knowledge that causes her to raise "her hands from the side of the pen in a gesture hieratic and profound." The pasture in front of her transforms in a "visionary light" into "a field of living fire." The farmland morphs into a manifestation of her own guilt and dirt and trash obsession. "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."<sup>33</sup> As Mrs. Turpin's vision over the land ends the final image is of her bringing up the rear of the procession of souls with "shocked and altered faces" and "even their virtues being burned away." The heraldic woods, crimson sky, and chorusing frogs have climatically and climactically responded to Turpin's desire and demolished it in a single ecstatic vision. The place that made up Turpin's dirt obsession has thwarted her desire to not be white trash or detritus. She is deemed lowly, bringing up the rear, and shocked at her status. The weight of the reality of who she is has crushed her.

*Weather that Thwarts, Celestial Bodies that Transform*

Another key to O'Connor's unique use of place is weather and celestial bodies in nature. We have already seen how certain aspects of place such as the sun can absorb a character's trauma or unveil desires. In this way they become desirable objects and

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 507.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 508.

revelatory actors. Yet O'Connor has the ability to allow her places to also thwart those desires, as demonstrated by Mrs. Turpin in "Revelation." In several stories celestial bodies and weather are able to ratchet up the tension, either by fighting back against a character's desires or by drawing them in stark contrast against their own actions.

Notice how O'Connor uses the sun to develop tension between two characters. In "The Life You Save," Lucynell Crater watches Shiftlet bask in the sun, "as if she were the owner of the sun." It is the sun, an atmospheric sense of place, that transforms and animates Shiftlet, and out of his fifty second pose beneath the sun comes Shiftlet's desire: "Lady...I'd give a fortune to live where I could see me a sun do that every morning." Then O'Connor follows Shiftlet's battle between the things he desires most, Lucynell's daughter, work, the family car, and freedom. By the closing paragraphs, when Shiftlet has abandoned Lucynell Crater Jr., asleep in a diner and decided to run off with the car, he finds himself no longer transfigured by place but pursued by it. "A cloud, the exact color of the boy's hat and shaped like a turnip, had descended over the sun, and another, worse looking, crouched behind the car. Mr. Shiftlet felt that the rottenness of the world was about to engulf him."<sup>34</sup> The previously transforming sun is now cut off, and Shiftlet experiences life without that transformation. O'Connor's staging here contrasts the beginning of the story and portrays the weather as seeking out and trying to thwart Shiftlet's desires. This interplay between heavenly and human bodies is accentuated even further by the name *Crater*, "which suggests the moon with its indentations and valleys,"

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 156.

according to Connie Ann Kirk.<sup>35</sup> The narrator even notes that while sitting on the porch with Lucynell Crater and her daughter the old woman's land is silhouetted in the evenings and "visited off an on by various planets and by the moon." These moments gather until Shiftlet is involved in a mounting astronomical struggle. The name Crater alone would not be enough to support this argument. A crater could suggest any terrestrial indentation. However, the curious clashing of the terrestrial realm with the astronomical or meteorological realm becomes apparent when paired with Shiftlet's dramatic staging against the sun, the "visitation" of the planets, Crater's description as "owner of the sun," and the sudden oncoming of the thunderstorm. Similar to Turpin in "Revelation," Shiftlet undergoes a drastic revelation as a result of these realms coming into contact with one another: "Mr. Shiftlet felt that the rottenness of the world was about to engulf him. He raised his arm and let it fall again to his breast. 'Oh Lord!' he prayed. 'Break forth and wash the slime from this earth!'"

There is the hint of possible transformation, regret, and re-creation in Shiftlet's final words, yet the scene is laced with doubt. While Shiftlet prays in a seeming manner of regret, why does he not turn back and return to Lucynell? If his words are hollow, then why does the rain immediately respond as both a cleansing action and an answer to Shiftlet's petition for washing "the slime from this earth"? Does the cloud's slow "descent" over his car suggest Shiftlet's descent into his own wickedness, realization of his guilt, or doubt over his own choices? Whatever the answer it is clear that the weather and the celestial bodies are engaged in a tug-of-war with Shiftlet's psychological trauma.

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<sup>35</sup> Kirk, 96.

He is plagued by his dissolute life and so he tells a possibly invented story to the hitchhiker he picks up. He feels guilty over the innocent girl he just abandoned and he tries to imagine a woman, his mother, that was even more innocent. Even in his lies and tall tales Shiftlet's psychological trauma seeps through. He is constantly restless as a result and always on the move, and the final line therefore shifts back to Shiftlet's habit of avoidance: "Very quickly he stepped on the gas and . . . raced the galloping shower into Mobile."<sup>36</sup> Throughout the story Shiftlet avoids revealing his name, but he reveals his disability. He avoids caring for his new wife, but he cares for his new car. In the end, Shiftlet avoids the weather's attempt to satiate his spoken desire instead racing away from the "galloping" shower, but it is weather and place that continue to highlight his trauma.

Similar celestial occurrences happen in "The Artificial Nigger" when Mr. Head is changed by the "miraculous moonlight" until he resembles Virgil summoned to accompany Dante or the archangel Raphael sent to guide Tobias.<sup>37</sup> It is an almost mocking transformation as Head is doomed to fail, unable to fulfill his potential as guide and mentor. Self-commissioned to accompany the young Nelson to Atlanta, Mr. Head hopes to disillusion the child so that he will stay at home in the country. Then, in the growing moonlight of Atlanta, after Head and Nelson have emerged from the dark "underworld" of the black neighborhood, O'Connor's characters encounter a transformation within themselves, a transformation that thwarts their original desires and obliterates their "differences." They stumble upon a statue of a negro, a statue that

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<sup>36</sup> *Complete Stories*, 156.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 249, 250.

mystifies and transforms them. “They stood gazing at the artificial Negro as if they were faced with some great mystery, some monument to another’s victory that brought them together in their common defeat. They could feel it dissolving their differences like an action of mercy.”<sup>38</sup> Unlike the thwarting nature of the weather and celestial bodies in “Life You Save,” the moon here serves to highlight and transform particular objects. The weather, sun, and moon do not fighting against the characters’ yearnings so much as melt them away. The attention is drawn then to an unusual object, a negro statue, which entrances Nelson and Head as if it had its own gravitational pull. The fact that a black object entrances the two white visitors shows its ability to cross over divides, yet the object also has the power of transference. Held motionless by the strange power of the object, the two characters switch places. “Mr. Head looked like an ancient child and Nelson like a miniature old man.”<sup>39</sup> While the power of these particular objects will be dealt with in the next section, it is important again to note how these strange moments take place in a revolving and gravitational sense of place. For O’Connor place cannot be stagnant. It must be active, and it must find its way into moments of trauma and change.

Certainly O’Connor’s places become a vital vehicle through which characters encounter grace and possibly even the sacred, but to limit her to stories of grace alone would be a travesty. Her places unlock desire, delve into trauma, and bury the idea of a stagnant geographical sense of place in favor of a place that is alive, magnetic, dynamic, sympathetic, antagonistic, and active — a place that in all its energy is bordering on something fantastical and larger than itself. This quality is able to unmask desire, the

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 269.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 269.



desire of the characters and quite possibly even the desire of the land itself. Place for O'Connor is not some stagnant location, touched and wounded by decades of war or history long past. It is something alive. It's not wounded, but it absorbs trauma. It's not full of plantations, but it's covered in dirt and soil and grime. It's not silent, so it responds with the resounding force of nature and weather and celestial bodies, responding to and even mocking the characters, their desires, and their actions.

We can see the animistic power of place in O'Connor's stories and how it has successfully unmasked the desire buried in places traumatic and mysterious. It has the power to transform and to confuse, the power to like the Cahto legend dismantle and reshape. For O'Connor, place is imbued with mystery, it absorbs trauma, its weather intervenes, and the dirt itself seems to be full of life. O'Connor's sense of place is one of animism and revelation. As a result, O'Connor should not be seen simply as a southern or Catholic author but as one of the pioneers of the animistic and expanding senses of southern place. But what of her objects and characters that are equally mystifying, if not more so?

### **Totems, Tikis, and Talismans: O'Connor's Mysterious Objects**

If we are to address the mysterious power of O'Connor's objects, we must first look at the town in which she spent much of her life and wrote a vast majority of her stories (all but seven short stories, in fact). The city of Milledgeville, Georgia, on the west bank of the Oconee River was in fact land taken from the Creek Indians in an 1802 treaty. Sarah Gordon suggests, in her overview of O'Connor's life and home, *A Literary Guide to Flannery O'Connor's Georgia*, that there is strong evidence that the O'Connor Andalusia farm just outside Milledgeville was originally land belonging to the Ocute tribe of Native Americans. After the land was usurped and Milledgeville established in 1803, Gordon explains, these Native Americans left behind not only place names but also fascinating objects, "a wealth of pottery, tools, weapons," signs of a former life.<sup>40</sup>

While O'Connor often focused on the importance of present place and trauma, her stories do retain something of the history of Georgia, particularly the material aspects of Native American Georgia. Her stories, like her hometown of Milledgeville, are places littered with things, mysterious objects that perplex and transfix. These objects are totems, natural objects or animals adopted by people as one of sacred significance or a symbolic emblem. They are tikis, human figurines charged with a mysterious force and used to mark boundaries of sacred and significant sites. And they are talismans, objects

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<sup>40</sup> Gordon, 60.

taken and given colors, scents, symbolism, and patterns, to ward off evil or give protection and significance.

Given O'Connor's religious sensibilities, it is common for critics to characterize O'Connor's stories as parables and fables due to these mysterious objects that linger at the center of some lesson-bestowing transformation. It is easy to see them as representative of moments of grace or symbols for Christ, the devil, or God. But could they also be seen in a broader context, could O'Connor be continuing to populate the South with troves of mysterious objects that help to build a larger national and all-encompassing setting, one full of monstrous characters, crossover objects, and unexplained encounters?

### *Monstrosity and "Thing-ness"*

In O'Connor's South, objects take on a mysterious import, an almost hypnotic allure to the characters that encounter them. They are objects that become the center of a character's desire, playthings of monstrous characters, vehicles through which monstrosity can be carried out, and markers of sacred and significant sites. This is the "thing-ness" of O'Connor's objects, how they entice and charm, transfix and transform, fascinate and baffle. I would argue that to understand these objects in all their eccentricity will be to gain a fuller appreciation of how they function as a larger southern and national context.

Similar to the attraction of place and land, many objects become centers of obsessive desire for O'Connor's characters. In this sense, they become crossovers not in

relation to racial boundaries but in relation to place and bodies. Like land, objects are reinforced as something to be owned or as property. Like bodies, objects become seductive and transfixing. In “The Life You Save” Shiftlet focuses his desire on owning the Crater family vehicle: “He had always wanted an automobile but he had never been able to afford one before.”<sup>41</sup> It becomes the place where he sleeps: “‘Why listen, lady,’ he said with a grin of delight, ‘the monks of old slept in their coffins!’” Eventually, he falls more in love with the car, which takes on an almost regal quality in his admiration of it, than he ever does with Crater’s daughter: “[Lucynell’s] fuss was drowned out by the car. With a volley of blasts it emerged from the shed, moving in a fierce and stately way. Mr. Shiftlet was in the driver’s seat, sitting very erect. He had an expression of serious modesty on his face as if he had just raised the dead.”<sup>42</sup> Shiftlet is given the look of a serious servant, sitting at attention, and leading the procession of the car that drowns out his future wife. He gives all his attention to bringing the car, like a body, back to life.

In “Good Country People,” O’Connor tackles material objects and seduction. When the fake Bible salesman Manley Pointer tempts Hulga to meet him in the woods where he will seduce her, she logically thinks herself the object of Pointer’s desire. “He leaned over and put his lips to her ear. ‘Show me where your wooden legs joins on,’ he whispered...When after a minute, she said in a hoarse high voice, ‘All right,’ it was like surrendering to him completely. It was like losing her own life and finding it again, miraculously, in his.”<sup>43</sup> Hulga becomes lost in Pointer’s feigned desire, watching as his

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<sup>41</sup> *Complete Stories*, 154.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 288, 289.

face becomes “entirely reverent” as she uncovers her artificial leg. The seduction conjures up dreams in her mind: “She was thinking that she would run away with him and that every night he would take the leg off and every morning put it back on again.” Yet it is the artificial leg that entices Pointer. He steals it and leaves Hulga abandoned in the barn in the woods. Like Shiftlet, Pointer succumbs to the object and what it represents in place of the person. He is seduced by the oddity of the artificial leg and does whatever he can to possess it.

This supplanting of material objects in place of the personal is what O’Connor and others might call the devil seeping through the pages. Certainly an anagogical interpretation could be reached for these acts of abandonment, but the monstrosity also reaches to a different level. Objects become in these instances vehicles for and playthings of monstrosity. It is through his Bible sales door to door that Pointer is able to acquire contraband and seek out new and grotesque treasures for himself: “‘I’ve gotten a lot of interesting things,’ he said. ‘One time I got a woman’s glass eye this way. And you needn’t to think you’ll catch me because Pointer ain’t really my name. I use a different name at every house I call at and don’t stay nowhere long.’”<sup>44</sup> In “A View of the Woods,” the construction equipment is not simply digging up the land, Fortune’s obsessive desire. He watches as the “big disembodied gullet gorges itself on the clay, then, with the sound of a deep sustained nausea and a slow mechanical revulsion, turn and spit it up.” Then, in the last lines of the story, as his apparent stroke brings him down to the level of the soil that he so desires, he finds himself presented again with

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 291.

monstrosity, certainly symbolic of his recent brutal murder of his granddaughter: “He looked around desperately for someone to help him but the place was deserted except for one huge yellow monster which sat to the side, as stationary as he was, gorging itself on clay.”<sup>45</sup> The tone here is almost mocking. The objects so intimately attached to the characters’ desires toy with them as if fateful playthings.

These objects can also be taken as signs of particular acts of monstrosity. Yet monstrosity is not simply another word for the “grotesque.” Objects and body parts can be grotesque. Even particular desires could be seen as grotesque when they resemble the disability, ugliness, or distortion (even a psychological distortion) of other objects or body parts. For O’Connor acts of monstrosity are different. They are acts that leave irreparable damage. It is not only disgusting but it seems unforgiveable. Pointer shows evidence of this in “Good Country People,” slowly accumulating objects that represent his history of heinous acts of abandonment and salaciousness. The attention to the grotesque might focus on Hulga’s disability, her artificial leg, or even Pointer’s disordered desire for these objects. But the objects themselves represent the actual acts of abandonment, and in this sense they are monstrous. They recall victims who have been left behind, something of what represents them as a person forcibly taken. They are left behind to wallow, wonder, and come to grips with the trauma they have been made to undergo.

The Misfit is another who seeks to acquire objects as a sign of his monstrosity. When the first murders of the story are committed, the Misfit demands the father’s shirt:

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 335, 356.

“Bobby Lee was dragging a yellow shirt with bright blue parrots in it. ‘Thow [sic] me that shirt, Bobby Lee,’ The Misfit said. The shirt came flying at him and landed on his shoulder and he put it on. The grandmother couldn’t name what the shirt reminded her of.”<sup>46</sup> Even though her son had just been murdered in the woods, she cannot recall whose shirt it was. The trauma has overwhelmed her reason or perhaps she now admires the Misfit who is able to take action unlike her stagnant son. Kirk argues that the color of the shirt displays O’Connor’s intent. “His [Bailey’s] yellow shirt and yellow face after the accident suggest a lack of courage,” she says, and “his blue eyes match the blue parrots on the shirt, connecting him with parrots as one who simply repeats what he has already heard and does not think for himself.”<sup>47</sup> While the colorful symbolism may be plausible, the sheer monstrosity that the shirt represents is apparent — the grandmother’s son has been murdered and he now lies shirtless and hidden by the woods, yet she cannot even remember him.

Objects can also elicit internal monstrosities. In “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” when Julian finds himself revolted by his mother’s “preposterous hat,” which she wears “like a banner of her imaginary dignity,” a monstrous impulse seizes him. “There was in him an evil urge to break her spirit.”<sup>48</sup> Sure enough, Julian eventually witnesses this act as he watches his mother collapse on the sidewalk sending him into torment. His previous urge to see her broken is fulfilled. It consumes him and completes his monstrosity, all because of a hat. These objects are not simply ones of fascination or

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>47</sup> Kirk, 77.

<sup>48</sup> *Complete Stories*, 409.

allure; they open doors to monstrosity and are the vehicles to acts of splintering, abandonment, and isolation.

In a strange way, children in O'Connor become their own kind of crossover objects. They suffer and become objectified. In a letter to longtime correspondent and friend Betty Hester about an offer to write a story about a child who recently died of cancer, O'Connor said, "What interests me in it is simply the mystery, the agony that is given in strange ways to children."<sup>49</sup> Clearly O'Connor's stories are littered with suffering children. There are traumatized children, de-limbed children, and children of varying ages and innocence in agony throughout her stories, each one objectified or cast aside in some way: Hulga in "Good Country People," Mary Fortune-Pitts in "A View of the Woods," Lucynell Crater Jr. in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," Nelson in "The Artificial Nigger," John Wesley, June Star, and the unnamed baby in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," and Asbury in "The Enduring Chill," among others. The objectification of children is itself a kind of monstrosity but it is not the only sign of monstrosity in O'Connor's stories.

### *Silent Snakes*

O'Connor's famous quip to justify her startling and shocking style was that "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,"<sup>50</sup> has been attributed to her regular use of the grotesque. Yet these moments of shock and awe also allow O'Connor to mediate

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<sup>49</sup> *Habit of Being*, 394.

<sup>50</sup> *Mystery and Manners*, 34.



the internal change and transformation of a character.<sup>51</sup> O'Connor's characters are often then marked by some object or animal that designates a transformation that is about to occur or a space made significant by the impending change. I would go further and say that by pairing the encounters of these mysterious objects with monstrous events, a pattern surfaces where images of animals and objects generate a rich southern trope, a new kind of traumatic totem marking significant or sacred, though not necessarily religious, sites.

Objects such as the negro statue in "The Artificial Nigger" and the Byzantine tattoo of "just God" in "Parker's Back" take on a kind of untouchable power that emanates throughout the story and the characters. This energy enralls the characters and causes them to be both transfixed and transformed. In "The Artificial Nigger," when Mr. Head and Nelson stare at the broken negro statuary it was "as if they were faced with some great mystery" which they both felt "dissolving their differences." The object transmits a kind of energy that unravels the characters. This moment was preceded however by another monstrous act of abandonment. Head desire to see Nelson lost and neglected and so pretends to have forgotten about him. This act of abandonment becomes the central conflict between the two until it is dissolved away by the negro statuary. Like a talisman it wards off the evil of indifference, abandonment, and isolationism.

In other instances, the mysterious object transfixes and then amplifies the transformation through trauma. When O.E. Parker is inspired to get a tattoo that will finally impress his wife, he senses an energy "roaring inside him like a great generator."

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<sup>51</sup> Yaeger, 4, 5.

He is driven to mark himself again with a totem that will both change and release him from his current situation:

On one of the pages a pair of eyes glanced at him swiftly. Parker sped on, then stopped. His heart too appeared to be cut off; there was absolute silence. It said as plainly as if silence were a language itself, GO BACK. Parker returned to the picture—the haloed head of a flat stern Byzantine Christ with all-demanding eyes. He sat there trembling; his heart began slowly to beat again as if it were being brought to life by a subtle power.<sup>52</sup>

Essential to this revelation is the energy which causes a transformation in the characters, whether it be the dissolving wave of “mercy” experienced by Nelson and Head or the Byzantine eyes “enclosed in silence” witnessed by Parker. This is to be identified with the mysterious as opposed to the reasonable. The mysterious defies explanation. It stirs the characters to action, leaves them perplexed and contemplative, and heightens their desires. Simple attraction might be natural, biological, or even chemical, and as such might be included in a course on physics or biology. The mysterious however is not known for physical predictability. Likewise, in O’Connor, it is characterized by incomprehension and shock. It has a revelatory character, not a scientific one.

These sites of monstrosity and revelation reach their climax when totem-like objects, often animals, emerge. Of particular note is the presence of snakes surrounding moments of transformation, trauma, or revelation. O’Connor litters her stories with passing references to serpents. Could these totem-like symbols present any meaning in

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<sup>52</sup> *Complete Stories*, 522.

addition to the obvious biblical and Garden of Eden references? In most cases the animals are present in moments of trauma, whether it be through death, isolation, or revelation.

Parker's back is the only place left for a new tattoo because his body is covered in myriads of artwork including a tattoo of a "serpent coiled about a shield." The train that brought Mr. Head and Nelson to their monstrous revelations "disappeared like a frightened serpent into the woods." Tom Shiftlet stretches "like a weary snake waking up by a fire" and paints the automobile a snake-like "dark green with a yellow band around it." Mr. Fortune sells the land to Tilman, a man whose head weaves in a "snake-fashion" and who takes on a snake-like appearance: "His eyes were green and very narrow and his tongue was always exposed in his partly opened mouth." The Misfit shoots the grandmother when she touches him on the shoulder, causing him to jump back "as if a snake had bitten him." And Mrs. Turpin, just before her ecstatic vision of the woods, "shook her fist with the hose in it and a watery snake appeared momentarily in the air."

In each instance, the snake precedes the subjects of desire and trauma, whether it be the land that is sold, the car that is stolen, the criminal that is touched, the husband that is rejected, or the farm wife whose view of herself is shattered. These moments are traumatic in their suddenness and in their intensity. These mysterious snake-objects are given color, scents, symbolism, and patterns, to ward off evil or give protection and significance. They are impersonal forces that seem to exist in the universe with influence, authority, and efficacy. They hold the power to perform in a given situation or to transform the situation itself when they deem it necessary. It is a force altogether distinct from physical power, which acts in all kinds of ways for good and evil, and which it is of

the greatest advantage to possess or control. These mysterious objects in O'Connor can be seen not only as vehicles or signs of grace but as precursors and harbingers of monstrosity.

## **“Workable” Bodies: Exchange, Contagion and Quarantine in O’Connor**

In this thesis I have set about introducing a sampling of new categories and language for analyzing O’Connor’s work apart from her Catholic faith — traveling precarious back roads that lead into the author’s grittiest and most minute details. We see how charged O’Connor’s places can be when considering the active and proactive states of the environment and weather, and we can also see how the littering of mysterious objects both entrances and helps to give rise to a tone of mystery, wonder, and monstrosity. That being said, all the previous categories and arguments in one way or another lead back to O’Connor’s treatment of bodies. It is the bodies that are shaped by place. It is the bodies that are transfixed by objects. This is an area which I have come to call O’Connor’s “workable” bodies, carrying with it concerns both economic and ecological.

Given O’Connor’s many years on her family’s Andalusia Farm just outside Milledgeville, it is no wonder that her stories retain such a dramatic focus on the reality of rural and communal work. In many of O’Connor’s letters, beginning during her time completing her MFA at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop to her early death at the age of thirty-nine, there is an economic concern for the money that writers could make — or not make for that matter — by submitting to various literary magazines or by receiving meager royalty checks. While O’Connor spoke frequently about “the nature and aim of

fiction”<sup>53</sup> or the role of the “Catholic author,”<sup>54</sup> the artistic ideal was not always her endgame, or at least not her only endgame. These stories were a realistic source of income for the O’Connor family and a serious economic concern for their little dairy farm at Andalusia. When O’Connor sold the television rights for “The Life You Save May Be Your Own” in 1956, she used the \$800 to purchase a Hotpoint refrigerator for her and her mother, Regina — the Hotpoint refrigerator can still be seen in the kitchen at Andalusia. In a letter to Betty Hester, O’Connor joked about how the production company would surely edit her story and Ronald Reagan could end up playing the lead role of Tom Shiftlet (the role eventually went to Gene Kelly): “Mr. Shiftlet and the idiot daughter will no doubt go off in a Chrysler and live happily ever after. Anyway, on account of this, I am buying my mother a new refrigerator. While they make hash out of my story, she and me will make ice in the new refrigerator.”<sup>55</sup>

Subsequently we see in many of O’Connor’s stories the economic realities of farm life, widowed mothers in need of hired help, and students returning home dependent on their parents. These situations, which were a reality for the O’Connor family, were also a source of inspiration for Flannery. Andalusia became a “locus of reality” for her, Gordon notes, and she was able to find “inspiration, often comedic, in the quotidian” of farm life and labor.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> See O’Connor’s “The Nature and Aim of Fiction” and “Writing Short Stories” in *Mystery and Manners*.

<sup>54</sup> See also O’Connor’s four essays and lectures on Catholic belief and fiction writing contained in Chapter 5 of *Mystery and Manners*.

<sup>55</sup> *Habit of Being*, 174.

<sup>56</sup> Gordon, 63, 65.

Similarly, no matter the object of their desires, labor is a primary concern for O'Connor's characters. Labor is what consumes their time. It is what they talk and think about constantly. Work begins to define them and surround them. We see this as Tom Shiftlet announces himself "a carpenter," Manley Pointer declares that he is a Bible salesman, and Mark Fortune and Mrs. Turpin boast that they are landowners, developers of "progress" and proprietors of cotton, respectively. Not only are O'Connor's characters obsessed with agriculture, labor, and ownership, but the bodies themselves are transacted, exchanged, and thrown away as if pieces of property, currency, or pollution.

This makes O'Connor's bodies uniquely "workable" in several senses: (1) characters are labor-obsessed, concerned with economic advancement, even to the point of exchanging bodies for profit or trade; (2) characters' bodies are "worked on," that is shaped or broken down by the surrounding place, environment, and characters, then stitched back together; (3) these bodies then become isolated, buried, desecrated, and eroded, treated as throwaways and contagions to be discarded as if products of refuse, waste, or pollution resulting from their labor; (4) bodies transcend roles as mere characters and become actors, performers of particular "work," serving specific purposes as minstrels, orators, vehicles, and conduits. As a result, they become centers of energetic exchange in the physical sense, meaning moments of energy manifest violently and suddenly like an electric shock produced by contact.

### *Transaction and Exchange*

Critics have commented frequently on the importance that O'Connor places on the body, particularly when that body is disabled or impaired in some fashion. Setting the emotional, intellectual, and spiritual infirmities of O'Connor's characters aside, we see Hulga's missing leg, Shiftlet's missing arm, Lucynell Crater Jr.'s mental disability, Claud Turpin's ulcerous leg, General Sash's frailty, Rayber's deafness, Mrs. McIntyre's failing health and vision, Asbury's undulant fever, and Julian's mother's high blood pressure. Moreover, there is the general violence directed at the various bodies and the resulting trauma that they undergo.

Many studies explore O'Connor's use of the body in an abstract sense. Laurence Enjolras, in his book *Flannery O'Connor's Characters*, asserts that O'Connor used crippled and "ugly bodies" in an effort to convey the imperfection and sin of humanity. Even if they are not crippled, "it is clear that for O'Connor, the human body is essentially deprived of dignity or respectability," he says. "In no instance is it ever granted beauty."<sup>57</sup> Josephine Hendin similarly argues that O'Connor "regards the body itself as repulsive,"<sup>58</sup> perhaps a reactionary product of her own disease and discomfort. However, critics such as Hendin, Claire Katz, and Clara Park Christina Lake and Donald Hardy on the other hand break step and concentrate their arguments more on specific body parts. Yet the general thesis remains tied in many ways to O'Connor's faith. "Bodies in O'Connor's stories serve always to remind character and readers of what the Incarnation

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<sup>57</sup> Enjolras, 7.

<sup>58</sup> Hendin, 28, 63.



validates,” Lake notes.<sup>59</sup> And while Hardy embarks upon an epic exploration of O’Connor’s grammatical voice, his thesis serves to “illuminate the struggle with the divisions of spirit and matter by a close examination of the interactions of grammatical voice and the body at both the macro level and micro level of the narrative” so as to further support O’Connor’s emphasis on the sacred through “sacramental” and “incarnational” concepts of her fiction.<sup>60</sup> However, the thesis that I have undertaken is primarily concerned with refreshing the language and categories used in O’Connor studies; the goal of this section then is concentrate not on the grotesque qualities or specific body parts but on the way in which bodies themselves are deemed surplus to requirements, disposable, and throwaways.

The significance of throwaway bodies can be seen by following their intersections with the economic realities of labor, especially when bodies are subsumed into other characters’ transactions. Lucynell Crater, Mrs. Turpin, O.E. Parker’s unnamed female boss, Mrs. McIntyre, and Asbury’s mother all represent women who either make use of or seek out hired labor as a central action in the story. These characters become obsessed with work, eventually dragging others into their agricultural worlds. They become immersed in it. We begin to see a pairing of body and place, how they are alike, and what they allow us to see. Bodies become mere byproducts in future transactions, a means for economic advancement. Parker is made to sleep in the family’s farm truck. Turpin subjects the waiting room population to tales of the state of her farm and farm workers. Asbury is forced to return home where he is surrounded again by the hired help, his only

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<sup>59</sup> Lake, 9.

<sup>60</sup> Hardy, 1-5.

reprieve from his tiresome mother. They think, talk, and dream about work, and through this labor-obsessed world characters become transacted and owned. It is the logical result of a disposable, throwaway treatment of bodies.

Marriage is one of the first areas in which we see this nonchalant transaction of bodies. In “The Life You Save” Lucynell Crater is so “ravenous for a son-in-law,” that she agrees to sell her own daughter to a near stranger, and Shiftlet agrees to marry her for the price of \$17.50. Though she is her own daughter and disabled, she is treated as property, as a trading piece with which to bargain. “That’s all I got so it isn’t any use you trying to milk me,” Crater tells Shiftlet. Certainly this is an instance of white bodies attempting to adopt racial implications, yet no black bodies are seen in these exchanges. Similarly, in “Parker’s Back,” Parker and Sarah Ruth’s marriage in the county ordinary’s office comes complete with a receipt as if making a bank transaction: “She married them from behind the iron-grill of a stand-up desk and when she finished, she said with a flourish, ‘Three dollars and fifty cents and till death do you part!’ and yanked some forms out of a machine.”<sup>61</sup>

Other times the connection between land, labor, and bodies leaves marks. Parker works the old lady’s land and the “only reason he worked at all was to pay for more tattoos.”<sup>62</sup> By tattooing an image on his back then he is necessarily connecting it with land and labor. Parker is later scarred by his wife as she beats him with the broom leaving small welts over his back and shoulders. In other instances, characters are fatally wounded. The grandmother in “A Good Man” is shot three times through the chest by the

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<sup>61</sup> *Complete Stories*, 518.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 513.

Misfit. When Fortune and his son-in-law fight over land in “A View of the Woods,” Mary Fortune falls like the others into the role of throwaway. Her father declares that she is “mine to whip” as he seeks vengeance against Fortune for trying to sell the land. Caring though he may be, Fortune is also using his granddaughter to get back at his son-in-law. Not only is the relationship bordering on utilitarian but when Mary declares her independence from her grandfather, he discards her by smashing her head on the ground. This throwaway culture not only leaves marks, scars, and tattoos as reminders of the throwaway nature with which they have been treated, but it leaves bodies strewn on the ground. O’Connor’s stories are filled then with discarded bodies, with economic language that turns characters into transactions, all eventually leading to isolated bodies.

### *Isolation and Quarantine*

Certainly O’Connor’s characters are obsessed with work, and work becomes a means by which characters are isolated, either through social status or through voluntary and involuntary quarantine. This isolation is another way to treat the body as expendable and throwaway. Bodies become isolated in a variety of ways. They are buried, desecrated, eroded, disposed, and unhinged, but this trend of isolation can be simplified into two areas: characters that are deemed by others to be lesser, trash, or some kind of contagion or pollutant, and characters who voluntarily single themselves out, effectively quarantining themselves by actions that mark them as set apart.

In “Parker’s Back” we see both means of isolation collide with each other.

Parker’s first encounter with a man tattooed from head to foot changes him and seems to

single him out. “Parker had never before felt the least motion of wonder in himself. Until he saw the man at the fair, it did not enter his head that there was anything out of the ordinary about the fact that he existed. Even then it did not enter his head, but a peculiar unease settled in him. It was as if a blind boy had been turned so gently in a different direction that he did not know his destination had been changed.”<sup>63</sup>

Here, early on in the story, Parker’s desire for tattoos becomes a way in which he is singled out, in which his existence is questioned, and by which he seeks to mark himself as unique. It becomes a means of voluntary quarantine. He stands out from others by virtue of his tattoos. Yet when he returns home to show his wife the new tattoo on his back, she rejects him and sweeps him out of the house like a piece of trash. ““Idolatry! Enflaming yourself with idols under every green tree! I can put up with lies and vanity but I don’t want no idolater in this house!”” she says as she whacks him across the back with a broom. “She stamped the broom two or three times on the floor and went to the window and shook it out to get the taint of him off it.”<sup>64</sup>

Parker is diminished to level of a contaminant, something that has *tainted* Sarah Ruth’s life. Fortune has a similar reaction to his son-in-law, daughter, and children in “A View of the Woods.” Instead of a tattoo to set himself apart, Fortune uses his name to mark his body as an isolated self. While his family carries the name Pitts, Fortune is adamant that he has not a single drop of Pitts in him. He isolates himself and hopes to isolate his granddaughter as well until he kills her for declaring herself “PURE Pitts.” Fortune sees himself in Mary and as a result his murder becomes a form of racial

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 513.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 529.

cleansing. Fortune, driven by his desire for “progress,” cannot tolerate a Pitts to be connected to him, especially one who he deems of “his clay.”

While Parker treats his own body as a transaction through which he can isolate himself and Fortune treats his own blood and kin as disposable, many characters find themselves isolated by the actions of others. The Misfit disposes of the grandmother’s family one by one; Shiftlet abandons Lucynell Crater Jr. in a diner; Shiftlet is ironically abandoned by the hitchhiker; Mr. Head pretends to abandon Nelson; and Mrs. Turpin declares almost everyone an *other* by labeling them a “nigger” or “white trash.” In other instances, con men isolate characters by pulling them into their crimes. We see Shiftlet eventually pull Lucynell Crater Jr. away from her mother, Hulga pulled into the woods by Pointer, and the grandmother’s family separated one by one until she is alone with the Misfit.

At the heart of this isolation though remains the tension between desire, work, and economic advancement. As a result, and in pursuit of these economic ends, bodies become expendable. Labor becomes a means to set oneself apart, voluntary quarantine turns into a polluting influence, and isolation is anything but as bodies, desire, and labor collide in an energetic storm of opposing forces.

### *Energetic Exchange*

It is this sense of the energy, of unstoppable and confident forces, that I would like to address next. We have seen instances where bodies become associated with work when treated as property or driven into isolation. These reflect a sense of the body as a

throwaway object, but this final observation of “workable” bodies emphasizes a different form of exchange. There are times, often prior to the discarding of bodies, that there appears to be a conduction and transfer of energy. According to the subject of physics this is the force that we call *work*; it is the exertion of force or energy transferred by overcoming resistance or producing some change in matter. It is a weighty and suggestive exchange that yearns for explanation and again is not satisfied by merely labeling it a moment of “grace”. Bodies in these moments become conduits of energy and power becomes transacted between them, but what is this energy?

In “Parker’s Back,” when Parker first meets Sarah Ruth, he is shocked as if her touch were some form of static electricity. “Parker stuck out his hand and she came closer and looked at it. There was no mark on the palm and she took the hand and turned it over. Her own hand was dry and hot and rough and Parker felt himself jolted back to life by her touch.”<sup>65</sup> This moment suggests intimacy, passion, desire, and magnetism. Parker “couldn’t understand why he stayed with her now,” but he stayed with her “as if she had conjured him.” Parker’s wife is described like an enchantress or sorceress despite her traditional southern Christian views. She holds power over Parker. It is the power to keep him around, the power to make him reveal his name to her, and eventually the power to banish him in his brokenness. This is in stark contrast with Sarah Ruth’s refusal to touch or even look upon Parker by the end of the story. While she was seen as undesirable due to her pregnancy at the beginning of the story, Parker has usurped that position. His

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 512.

energy has faded, the spell is broken by the tattoo Parker receives on his back, and she cannot even touch him.

Another touch elicits an even more dramatic response in “A Good Man” when the grandmother reaches out to touch the Misfit on the shoulder: “The Misfit sprang back as if a snake had bitten him and shot her three times through the chest.”<sup>66</sup> These brief touches show an exchange that sends shockwaves through the characters. It makes them recoil, wonder, become enchanted, and lose their reason. It precedes the disposal of bodies and turns their fates, for better or worse, in a new direction. When Shiftlet first arrives at the Crater farm and basks in the glow of the sun, it is easy to see him soaking up solar energy like a warming panel. When Shiftlet has finished energizing, he cannot but help to speak what he desires. The energy seems to pull desire from the very heart of Shiftlet and the other characters. The bodies begin to transcend mere characters and become actors who perform particular functions. They are shaped by places, objects, and characters, torn apart, and stitched back together again. We see bodies that act as minstrels, orators, and vehicles. Imbued with a new power, the characters are always telling stories: origin stories, transformation stories, fables, tales, and lies to get what they want. Immediately after this absorption of energy, Shiftlet begins telling Crater the story of a heart surgeon in Atlanta. Transformed by the energy of the moon, Mr. Head tells tales of the city and the “underworld” that lurks beneath the sidewalk. Jolted to life by Sarah Ruth’s touch Parker begins to explain the stories behind each of his tattoos.

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

These energetic exchanges could be seen in a variety of ways: (1) the turning point or moment when a character forgets all attachments, abandons reason, or transforms; (2) energy as addiction, where a character cannot explain the rationale behind their actions, only that it *is* and what it is they cannot get enough of; (3) energy as a shared, symbiotic relationship where places, objects, and bodies reach a point of conjunction. While there are certainly more ways in which these encounters could be read, it is interesting to note that all require contact of some sort. Parker must touch his wife in order for the exchange to happen. The grandmother must touch the Misfit. Even Mr. Head and Shiftlet must be touched by the light of the moon and sun, respectively, in order for the transformation to occur. The contact helps even more so to reinforce the resulting instances of isolation or quarantine. The characters are reaching out for relationship, for contact, warmth, connection, but they are pushed aside and banished. Once magnetic, attractive, energetic, working bodies, they are refused and turned into refuse, trash.

In a rather ironic sense, this is precisely what has happened in O'Connor studies. O'Connor's stories, which are filled with such energy, imagination, transformation, and peculiarity, have been pushed aside and their strange qualities not given their due. It is precisely these quirky, caricatured, painted, and intense moments that set O'Connor apart, and it would be a shame to focus solely on O'Connor's theological framework at the expense of richer ideas buried beneath the surface. Yet O'Connor was aware of this dilemma and how her stories would be judged: "I am afraid that one of the greatest disadvantages of being known as a Catholic writer is that no one thinks you can lift the



pen without trying to show somebody redeemed.”<sup>67</sup> To modify O’Connor’s comment slightly, I am afraid now that one of the great disadvantages of studying O’Connor now is that no one truly studies her stories, only her. It is time to find new ways, new categories, and new language with which we can bring O’Connor into a new stratosphere of literary debate and into a new South.

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<sup>67</sup> *Habit of Being*, 434.

### **Reading Beyond Grace: “A Good Man Is Hard to Find”**

In a letter to friend and writer Katherine Anne Porter, O'Connor described “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” as a story so grim that it was the “only one of her stories she could read aloud without laughing.”<sup>68</sup> The story tells of a southern family leaving for a three-day vacation from Atlanta to Florida, a place the unnamed grandmother does not wish to go due to the recent rumors of an escaped convict known as The Misfit traveling the same direction. The grandmother, unable to convince her son Bailey to change their plans, is the first in the car the next morning and continues a string of commentary until she cunningly persuades her son to drive down a dirt road toward a plantation that she recalls was once there. Shocked by her realization that the plantation was in fact in east Tennessee and not in Toombsboro, Georgia, the grandmother upsets her cat's cage and causes her son to wreck the car that flips over once and throws his wife and baby out of the passenger side door. Bailey, along with his wife, baby, two young children June Star and John Wesley, and the grandmother emerge with only minor injuries to then be met by the aforementioned Misfit and his two henchmen, Bobby Lee and Hiram. Each family member is separated from the grandmother until she is left alone with The Misfit to beg for her life. In her final act, the grandmother exclaims, “You're one of my own children,” and touches The Misfit on the shoulder at which point he shoots her three times through the chest.

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<sup>68</sup> For more on the relationship between Porter and O'Connor, see Connie Ann Kirk's *Critical Companion to Flannery O'Connor*.

In *Passing by the Dragon*, J. Ramsey Michaels argues that in O'Connor's stories "God and the devil (not always easily distinguishable) act largely through other people, often the ones we least expect, the freaks and lunatics who inhabit her pages."<sup>69</sup> Certainly he would identify the psychotic Misfit as one of these "lunatics" through which God or the devil could act. Not only does The Misfit strike up a lengthy conversation with the grandmother about Jesus raising people from the dead, but he jumps back from the grandmother's touch "as if a snake had bitten him." This carries biblical and religious connotation for Michaels, what he labels as "looking for the Dragon, or 'the old serpent,' in O'Connor's stories." The grandmother is also one of these anagogical characters, "not only a recipient of grace, but the channel of grace to The Misfit," Michaels adds.

John Sykes Jr. recently presented a similar argument when he suggested that any broken bodies in O'Connor's stories must function as a stand-in for Jesus' crucifixion. "This omnipresent element of Catholic worship is figured forth in every O'Connor story where we find a broken or wounded body," he said in his 2010 essay "How Symbol Means."<sup>70</sup> Sykes continues: "And I would argue that in each of these instances, we are not simply being reminded of Jesus' death on a cross, but instead are being shown an utterly unexpected way in which a human being is joined to Christ through redemptive suffering."<sup>71</sup>

These anagogical arguments have dominated O'Connor criticism, particularly in regards to this story, for decades. The grandmother's words to The Misfit before she is

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<sup>69</sup> Michaels adds that this "anagogical" or "sacramental" vision also makes God or the devil present through the "subhuman: a rogue bull, a tacky piece of statuary, or a tattoo."

<sup>70</sup> For Sykes' full essay, see *Flannery O'Connor in the Age of Terrorism*, ed. by Avis Hewitt and Robert Donahoo.

<sup>71</sup> Hewitt, 134.

shot, “You’re one of my own children,” has baffled readers, and O’Connor’s own comments have noted this moment as one of grace and the “devil stirred to frenzy.” But what does the grandmother’s recognition mean, does she identify with The Misfit, and how can she forgive him for murdering her entire family? Michaels argues that this is the grandmother’s moment of change, conversion, and transformation.

While an analogical view of O’Connor’s work can explain this single moment and how The Misfit recoils at the grandmother’s forgiving touch, it cannot sufficiently explain how the grandmother is the architect of her own self-destruction. This singular moment of murder, as shocking as it is, overshadows the strange ways in which O’Connor arrives at the moment, and the rest of the story can only be explained by taking a closer look at the areas which have been enumerated in this thesis, namely the coming together of objects attached to monstrosity, the animistic nature of place, and discarded bodies. These three areas, when more closely examined in a single story, will provide a fuller picture of the entire story and offer possible (and certainly needed) interpretations beyond the analogical.

From the first page of the story, the irksome sensation that the family, and the grandmother in particular, are in for a world of trouble is clearly present. “The Grandmother didn’t want to go to Florida,” O’Connor’s narrator begins. “She wanted to visit some of her connections in east Tennessee and she was seizing at every chance to change Bailey’s mind.” This story is destined to be about change, about characters that pull in opposite directions, and about the conversion of the mind. While it would be easy then to look at the “snake bite” that The Misfit experiences at the end and its biblical and

satanic possibilities related to grace, I would like to look at another totem-like animal that is also attached to monstrosity but often overlooked amid the dramatic acts at the end of the story.

If there is one character that this story is about, it is undoubtedly the grandmother. Her desire to not go to Florida is mentioned in the first sentence, she is the one who first raises concern over the escaped Misfit, and she is the one who sneaks the cat into the car the following morning. The grandmother, knowing full well that Bailey “didn’t like to arrive at a motel with a cat,” hides her cat, Pitty Sing, underneath her big black valise. This is the grandmother’s first deception and one which is given an odd and somewhat illogical explanation: “she [the grandmother] was afraid he [the cat] might brush up against one of the gas burners and accidentally asphyxiate himself.” This single deception alone would not be enough to consider the grandmother monstrous, but it is her second deception that turns the table. Hoping to see a plantation from her childhood, she tells the children that there was a secret panel hiding silver somewhere in the house. This of course is a lie but one which the grandmother tells “craftily, not telling the truth but wishing that she were,” the narrator notes. The cat makes its next appearance when the grandmother realizes that the plantation is in east Tennessee and not in Toomsboro. The grandmother, shocked by her own embarrassment, upsets the basket with Pitty Sing in it and sends him snarling throughout the car until he latches onto Bailey’s neck and causes the car to swerve into a ditch rolling over and leaving the family slightly injured but alive. “The grandmother was curled up under the dashboard, hoping she was injured so that Bailey’s wrath would not come down on her all at once. The horrible thought... was

that the house she had remembered so vividly was not in Georgia but in Tennessee.” Even in the midst of the accident the grandmother is not concerned for her family. She is hoping to escaping retribution for her lapse in memory, and rightly so as the family is soon approached by a car carrying The Misfit and his henchmen who interrogate and eventually kill them all. This is where the grandmother’s actions become monstrous. Her deception leaves irreparable damage and cannot be taken back, and it is all the more monstrous because it could easily have been prevented. After the Misfit has killed the grandmother, we see the cat one last time. “Take her [the grandmother] off and throw her where you thrown the others,” the Misfit said, “picking up the cat that was rubbing itself against his leg.” The cat has slowly evolved over the course of the story and attached itself increasingly to monstrosity. It has moved from innocent pet in danger of death by asphyxiation, to cause of the potentially deadly accident, and finally to a representation of the grandmother and the family that embraces The Misfit by cozying up against his leg. In the most conservative interpretation the cat becomes a totem-like symbol of death (which led to interpretations of the grandmother as a witch that O’Connor found hilarious).<sup>72</sup> On this level, it is simply a foreshadowing. In a more liberal interpretation, the cat is a harbinger of death. It becomes a representation of the family and their flirtation with acts of monstrosity, both the grandmother’s willing deceptions and The Misfit’s ordered murders. The cat is the lone survivor from the car and so becomes an anti-talisman that instead of warding off evil turns the grandmother’s monstrosity into a magnetic pull that draws The Misfit ever closer. While the snake has a single, vibrant

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<sup>72</sup> *Habit of Being*, 389.

moment prior to the climactic act of the grandmother's murder, it is the cat that becomes a fuller embodiment of an object attached to monstrosity.

Ironically, it is the grandmother, despite her monstrosity at times, who is the only one able to see the surrounding place for what it is: alive and active. While driving she "pointed out interesting details of the scenery: Stone Mountain; the blue granite that in some places came up to both sides of the highway; the brilliant red clay banks slightly streaked with purple; and the various crops that made rows of green lace-work on the ground." The grandmother's observations are streaked with colors that give the passing places motion and vibrancy, yet the following line imbues the trees (which will become increasingly important later) with something resembling emotion and feeling. "The trees were full of silver-white sunlight and the meanest of them sparkled." The trees themselves are "mean" and hold within them a dichotomy of light and eventually darkness. When the family emerges from the car wreck the woods come back into view, "tall and dark and deep." They begin to take on a life of their own as the grandmother recognizes The Misfit and calls him out, unable to refrain from speaking the truth. "Behind them the line of woods gaped like a dark open mouth." These trees become not only "mean," but they also want to digest something. With each mention the trees are opening wider and wider, hoping to swallow the impending trauma. It is the same woods that The Misfit orders Bobby Lee and Hiram to take the rest of the family into and eventually gun shots ring out from what feels like "somewhere off stage." Having finally received its tribute of trauma, the grandmother "could hear the wind move through the tree tops like a long satisfied insuck of breath." The woods, like Pitty Sing, the cat, have

evolved into something else entirely. The woods have become animistic and another character acting in the story as it draws the family into its clutches and lets out a moan of satisfaction following its murderous meal. It acts, swallows, digests, and even burps with “satisfied breath,” all in reaction to the trauma of a single family on their way to Florida.

This family is also one whose bodies are treated as expendable, as throwaways, by both The Misfit and the grandmother. We already looked at the grandmother’s disregard for her family after the car wreck and how she tries to save face above all else. This is a single act of a throwaway mentality, which she repeats again after Bailey is murdered. Bobby Lee emerges from the woods with Bailey’s blue parrot-covered yellow shirt. “The grandmother couldn’t name what the shirt reminded her of,” the narrator points out. The sentence itself is interesting and feels distant. The grandmother is not questioning *whose* shirt it was, only *what* it reminded her of. The action is not being able to name, as if she were trying to recall information for an exam. The examination however is not about her family or “connections” which were so important to her at the beginning of the story. Her ancestral links have been tossed out. What is important is the present moment, how she will act now, and what that will bring for the future. It is the grandmother’s own life that is being examined, and her inability to name her son draws into greater relief her approaching exclamation that The Misfit is one of her own children. It is the throwaway mentality that leads to an entire reflection of her life, and it is the face of The Misfit that pulls it out of her as buried desire was pulled out of Tom Shiftlet, Mark Fortune, and so many others. “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 babies. You’re



one of my own children!” The Misfit’s body becomes a hybrid of sorts in this moment. He is both adult murderer and crying child, and the grandmother must reach out to touch this strange and fascinating creature. Unfortunately, while the grandmother is able to come to terms with her throwaway and monstrous actions, the Misfit is unwilling to toss aside his monstrosity. The Misfit feels “bitten” by the grandmother’s touch. He cannot bear to feel someone who he once related to but is now attempting to reconcile with her monstrosity through recognition. The grandmother recognizes this monstrosity in The Misfit and in herself, a fact that makes them kin, which the grandmother then calls out. The only way that The Misfit can respond is to participate once again in the throwaway mentality. “Without his glasses, The Misfit’s eyes were red-rimmed and pale and defenseless-looking. ‘Take her off and throw her where you thrown the others,’ he said.”<sup>73</sup> The grandmother is tossed out just as O.E. Parker, Lucynell Crater Jr., and Mary Fortune were tossed aside. The only bright side is that Parker and Crater’s trauma did not end in death. Regardless, it is the expendable treatment of bodies that reveals continued monstrosity and the potential to be rid of it. Flannery O’Connor would surely call this promise of potential the power of grace, but even so the strange moments that lead to these infamous encounters should not be overlooked.

These three areas help to give a fuller picture of the story as a whole and offer additional interpretations to the anagogical. Objects reveal and attach themselves to monstrosity. Place begins to act and to react to trauma that manifests as moments of truth, realization, and guilt. Bodies are thrown away or excluded, pulling out buried desires and

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<sup>73</sup> *Complete Stories*, 132,133.

the realization of self. What this means is that the final scene of “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” cannot be seen as only a moment of grace. The objects, places, and bodies have evolved into things so strange that a religious, analogical interpretation is no longer sufficient. The grandmother is not simply forgiving, she is a defeated monster. The agent of change could be attributed not only to grace, but also to monstrosity, totems, guilt, or trauma. The evolved meaning then is that the strangeness found in the quotidian and the everyday is just as paramount as the moment of death. Simple acts are larger than they may seem — white lies lead to murder and hidden cats to accidents — and the largeness of the world is found in the smallest details — the wind carries the trauma of an entire family and the human pendulum swinging between monstrosity and innocence can be reflected in the twisted face of a murderer. The strangeness of life can happen anywhere and through anything, through trees, statues, cats, tattoos, backhoes, and faces. This strangeness should not be outweighed by the brief moments of shock and awe. It is these strange moments that set O’Connor apart, and they should not be thrown away.

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## **Biography**

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