



Women in the Liberal Arts Tradition

with Jessica Hooten Wilson

Lecture 3: Flannery
O'Connor

Outline:

Flannery O'Connor

- She lived from March 25, 1925-August 3, 1964
- The Odd One
 - Cradle-born Catholic
 - Father died of Lupus (1941)
 - Iowa Writer's Workshop, Yaddo, NY
 - She spent the majority of the rest of her life in Milledgeville, GA (Andalusia).
 - Writing during Cold War and Civil Rights Movement
 - *Wise Blood* (1952), *A Good Man is Hard to Find* (1953), *The Violent Bear it Away* (1961), *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1965)
 - Died of Lupus at 39 (1964)
 - She said, "The friends of God are the ones who suffer."
- Influences from August 28, 1955 to Hester (HB 98-99)
 - "I didn't really start to read until I went to Graduate School and then I began to read and write at the same time. When I went to Iowa I had never heard of Faulkner, Kafka, Joyce, much less read them. Then I began to read everything at once, so much so that I didn't have time I suppose to be influenced by any one writer."
 - She read a great array of works.
 - She was willing to learn even from authors who didn't align with the Church.
 - She was a great admirer of Shakespeare.
 - She read Dante, the prose translation and not the poetry.
- Other influences:
 - Classical tradition:
 - The Bible (Douay-Rheims Catholic edition)
 - Daniel and Judges
 - Butler's Saints Lives
 - *Oedipus Rex*
 - Dante's The Divine Comedy
 - Shakespeare
 - "The Hound of Heaven"
 - Southern Tradition
 - William Faulkner



- Caroline Gordon, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, Walker Percy
- *Wise Blood* by Flannery O'Connor
 - “If this really is the unaided work of a young lady, it is a remarkable product.” Evelyn Waugh
 - Early on, *Wise Blood* was scandalous to most people.
 - Grotesque, Dostoevskian, Kafkaesque
 - “Baffled reviewers” (Moran, 70): “O’Connor’s reputation initially suffered because her first readers were not ready for a voice as original as hers”
 - Three time winner of O. Henry Award.
 - She appeared on NBC-TV 1955 with dramatization of “The Life You Save”
 - Several stories made into film or television shows.
- “The Fiction Writer and His Country” (1957)
 - “The novelist and Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he may will be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to a hostile audience.” (CW, 805)
 - “You have to make your vision apparent by shock – for the hard of hearing you shout and for the almost blind you draw large startling figures.” (CW 806)

Flannery O’Connor’s Works

- *Wise Blood* (1952)
 - This is the story of Hazel Motes.
 - “I preach the Church without Christ. I’m member and preacher to that church where the blind don’t see and the lame don’t walk and what’s dead stays that way. Ask me about that church and I’ll tell you it’s the church that the blood of Jesus don’t foul with redemption...I’m going to preach there was no Fall because there was nothing to fall from and no Redemption because there was no Fall and no Judgement because there wasn’t the first two. Nothing matters but that Jesus was a liar.” (WB 105)
 - Flannery is testing her readers. What do you believe? Is Jesus a liar?
 - Hazel Motes blasphemes his way towards God.
 - Christ is a figure that haunts Hazel.
- *A Good Man is Hard to Find*
 - A Good Man is Hard to Find
 - **The River**
 - The Life You Save May Be Your Own
 - A Stroke of Good Fortune
 - **A Temple of the Holy Ghost**



- The Artificial N – Flannery insisted on the vulgar word in the title because she was trying to talk to her Southern choir and call them out, that even the racism that is prescribed to in the South is artificial, socially constructed. This language is no longer what we say.
 - Toni Morrison essay on this story concludes that she thinks that this is racist to have a conversation.
 - Maybe also read Ralph Wood’s take on it.
 - Have the hard conversations about this discussion of her work.
- A Circle in the Fire
- **A Late Encounter with the Enemy**
- Good Country People
- **The Displaced Person**
- *The Violent Bear it Away* (1960)
 - “From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent bear it away.” (Matthew 11:12)
- *Everything that Rises Must Converge* (1964)
 - **Everything that Rises Must Converge**
 - She is calling out that there is a root of racism that is from sin itself.
 - Greenleaf
 - A View of the Woods
 - The Enduring Chill
 - The Comforts of Home
 - The Lame Shall Enter First
 - **Revelation**
 - **Parker’s Back**
 - Judgement Day
 - She was working on this when she was dying in the hospital. She saw herself as being in process.
- Scandalous Stories
 - “That belief in Christ is to some a matter of life and death has been a stumbling block for readers who would prefer to think it a matter of no great consequence.”
 - Reviewers often, “had hold of the wrong terror.”
 - She is scandalizing with the truth of the gospel.
- Christian Writer
 - Imagination converts vision
 - “I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy.” (CW 804)
 - Audience: those “who believe God is dead” and “for whom the Bible is familiar”
 - Knows her vocation: not a preacher, not a teacher, but a writer
 - “Dear God, please help me to be an artist, please let it lead to you.” (29)



- “If I ever do get to be a fine writer, it will not be because I am a fine writer but because God has given me credit for a few of the things He kindly wrote for me.” (23)
- Prophetic and incarnational imagination
 - Prophetic: “As for me, I don’t read anything but the newspaper and the Bible. Everybody else did that it would be a better world.” (HB 574)
 - Incarnational: “I find myself in a world where everybody has his compartments, puts you in yours, shuts the door and departs. One of the awful things about writing when you are a Christian is that for you the ultimate reality is the Incarnation, the present reality is the Incarnation, the whole reality is the Incarnation, and nobody believes in the Incarnation.” (CW 943)
 - Literal and figurative/spiritual meaning
 - We have to constantly read her on these two planes (literally and figuratively).
- Moment of Grace
 - Look for the moment of grace. These moments of grace are liturgical.
 - “I think that the Church is the only thing that is going to make this terrible world we are coming to endure; the only thing that makes the Church endure is that it is somehow the body of Christ and that on this we are fed. It seems to be a fact that you have to suffer as much from the Church as for it but if you believe in the divinity of Christ, you have to cherish the world at the same time that you struggle to endure it.” (942)
 - “To know oneself is to know one’s region. It is also to know the world, and it is also, paradoxically a form of exile from that world. The writer’s value is lost, both to himself and to his country, as soon as he ceases to see that country as a part of himself, and to know oneself is, above all, to know what one lacks. It is to measure oneself against the Truth, and not the other way around.”
 - She gives her characters a moment where they can perceive the grace, and accept or reject this grace.

A Good Man is Hard to Find

- This is the most anthologized of Flannery’s stories.
- What does it mean to be good? Why is a good man hard to find? Where in Scripture do we hear find?
- Start with the title, teach them how to read slowly, how to read well, to hear the figurative and literal meaning of these words. Then begin the story.
- The Grandmother didn’t want to go to Florida. She wanted to visit some of her connections in east Tennessee and she was seizing at every chance to change Bailey’s mind. Bailey was the son she lived with, her only boy. He was sitting on the edge of his chair at the table, bent over the orange sports section of the Journal. “Now look here, Bailey,” she said, “see here, read



- this,” and she stood with one hand on her thin hip and the other rattling the newspaper at his bald head. “Here this fellow that calls himself the Misfit is a loose from the Federal Pen and headed toward Florida and you read here what it says he did to these people. Just you read it. I wouldn’t take my children in any direction with a criminal like that loose in it. I couldn’t answer to my conscience if I did.”
- This is a parable with two main characters. Ask, “Why is she called the Grandmother?”
 - It is good to perform these scenes aloud.
 - She makes commands of her son. She makes demands of her son, not wanting what he wants.
 - Compare how the Grandmother starts with how she ends.
 - The Misfit:
 - “Jesus thrown everything off balance...”
 - “Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead,” The Misfit continued, “and He shouldn’t have done it. He thrown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it’s nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn’t, then it’s nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can-by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness,” he said and his voice had become almost a snarl.”
 - This moment of grace is presented to the Grandmother. She has not thrown everything off and followed Jesus. She opens herself up to the moment of grace.

How to teach Flannery O’Connor

- Don’t start with her biography: start with her fiction.
- Read her stories aloud. Act out the characters and their voices in class.
- Enjoy them first. Analyze them second.
- Close reading: discuss on word at a time for Literal and Figurative/Spiritual meaning.
- Create in response to her stories: write your own versions; illustrate them; change them into drama or poems.