

She's No Wordsworth

Examining the Divine in the Works of Flannery O'Connor

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In Wordsworthian poetry, such as “Ode: Intimations of Immortality,” celestial light, beautiful starlit waters, valleys, and birds are described in detail, so that a divine spark hidden within the natural world may be revealed. As in the surrounding landscape, an ethereal element is thought to be embedded within humanity, remaining after death in “our embers” (2). Like the works of Wordsworth, descriptions of both man and nature by Flannery O'Connor contain references to the divine. In the story “Good Country People,” for example, the main character sees a “blue figure struggling successfully over the green speckled lake,” reminiscent of Jesus’s walk on water in the Sea of Galilee (Matt. 14. 22-36). Yet another essence of the divine is encapsulated in “The King of the Birds,” where the shedding of a peacock’s tail in the fall, and its subsequent regeneration in the spring, mirrors the death and resurrection of Christ (Matt. 27. 45-56; Matt. 28. 1-10). Although both Wordsworth and Flannery O'Connor describe godly characteristics in their compositions, the ethereal spark they attempt to elucidate is distinctly different. It differs based upon the authors’ views of human nature and their spiritual perceptions.

Depictions of human nature differ significantly within the works of both authors. Encounter poems by Wordsworth, such as “The Old Cumberland Beggar,” describe marginalized figures who possess otherworldly characteristics. Ultimately, these figures use their spiritual strength to overcome hardship and become one with their environment. In “The Old Cumberland Beggar,” for example, a mendicant transcends hardship through elicitation of charity, and brings forth a loving spirit from those around him in the process. As revealed through encounter poems, Wordsworth prefers to utilize an inductive approach to ascertain divine qualities, whereby meaning is discovered through examination of real-world examples. Wordsworth finds that the actions of individuals are imbued with a divine spark which, in turn, cultivates beauty in other community members.

Unlike Wordsworth, who inductively looks at human behavior to find spiritual truth, O'Connor writes about human nature from a deductive perspective. Rather than erecting theories from behavioral analysis, she uses a Catholic spiritual lens to document social activity (“Flannery O'Connor and the Peacock” 1). In accordance with Catholic beliefs, humans are depicted as wicked and in need of sanctification. This perspective is clearly evident in the story “Good Country People.” The main character, Hulga, who has a wooden leg from a hunting accident, was highly educated, yet led a misanthropic lifestyle retracted from society. Hulga’s mother, who adopted a seemingly virtuous façade, revealed that her Christian faith was less than stellar, lying to a salesman about the location of her bible (270). Finally, the deceitful bible salesman, named Manley Pointer, is a consummate conman and thief. Obscene playing cards and alcohol hidden within a bible revealed his true nature, while the theft of Hulga’s wooden leg exposed his malicious intent. Collectively, the shortcomings of each character paint a negative picture of

human existence. Through these shortcomings, the author projects a potential to comprehend and benefit from God's amazing grace.

In addition to assertions of virtue, or the lack thereof, characterizations of the soul differ according to author. Wordsworthian encounter poems describe the presence of an internal coping mechanism that promotes resilience to life's hardships. In the composition, "We Are Seven," for example, a young girl's refusal to acknowledge the death of her two siblings maintains the integrity of family. In "The Discharged Soldier," an idealized conception of home, along with a keen faith in God, allows a battle-hardened regular to remain vigilant in the face of hardship.

In contrast to the fullness and capability of souls depicted in Wordsworth's compositions, a hollowness of human existence is illustrated in O'Connor's stories. In the narrative "Good Country People," Hulga appears bereft of feeling. The loud and deliberate thumping of her wooden leg appears to echo the emptiness of her character, as well as a lack of contentment which needs to be fulfilled. In the story "Parker's Back," Obadiah Elihue Parker, also reveals a void, which he attempts to fill with tattoos. He places a tiger and a panther on each shoulder, a coiled cobra on his chest, hawks on his thighs, and royal figures across his stomach (659). He even goes so far as to tattoo his mother's name, Betty Jean, on his heart ("Parker's Back" 658). Such adornment emphasizes the exterior, serving as a vain attempt to worship objects viewed in the physical world. This emphasis on exterior attractiveness is reminiscent of an ancient Japanese story, where a tattoo artist captures a young girl and adorns her body; the artist is hoping to bring out the girl's true beauty. Instead, she becomes cruel and deceitful ("Outer Marks" 118).

A final difference in human nature is the idealistic, rather than realistic, depictions of characters. While Wordsworth often describes marginalized individuals, such as a mendicant, he finds the idealistic qualities of these figures. The Cumberland beggar, for example, becomes a benevolent and integral part of society, rather than a useless dreg. Likewise, Wordsworth's solitary reaper enhances the idyllic scenery of a vale through singing a mellifluous tune (Niu and Xiang 58). Characters within O'Connor's work, in contrast, are realistic figures filled with infirmity and wickedness. All of their weaknesses are exposed. As indicated by Asals, such portrayals "mirror a profound need to come to terms with the physical, to accept corporeal life, however abhorrent or painful" ("Duality of Images" 65). The unvarnished characterizations of figures outline a need for grace in a Godless world.

Differences in portrayal of human behavior and feelings represent key philosophical differences between authors. Within early works by Wordsworth, such as "Salisbury Plain," he recognizes a touch of the divine in nature, citing a "glittering main" of sunshine and the balmy air which is "God diffused" (354, 359). Although he has a sense that there is something spiritual, he is unable to concretely identify this quality. In later works, such as "The Ruined Cottage" and "Michael" he forges an ethereal bridge between society and nature. Human life becomes a microcosm of the natural world. Rather than being separate from the plants and animals that grow and die, the cycle of human birth, development, and decay runs in tandem.

Whereas Wordsworth ascertains divine influence through the inductive analysis of surroundings, O'Connor writes with a clear philosophical conception of the spiritual realm. Her stories adhere to a "central Christian mystery" ("The Church and the Fiction Writer" 808). What makes her perspective of the divine spark truly unique is her simultaneous exploitation of both deductive and inductive strategies. In her composition "The Church and the Fiction Writer," she wrote that, "The Catholic fiction writer, as fiction writer, will look for the will of God first in the laws and limitations of his art and will hope that if he obeys these, other blessings will be added to

his work" (812). While she recognizes the Christian laws that govern her work, she also acknowledges the inductive moral lessons that may be derived from divine inspiration.

Due to the sincerity of O'Connor's faith in Catholicism, she does not seek the divine within man, preferring to create delinquent characters like Manley Pointer, who "prowl about looking for girls with wooden legs" ("Some Aspects of the Grotesque" 814). She deliberately depicts the shocking truth of negative human behavior so that a need for God may be exemplified. Concerning her unvarnished view of humanity, O'Connor wrote that, "It is when the individual's faith is weak, not when it is strong, that he will be afraid of an honest fictional representation of life, and when there is a tendency to compartmentalize the spiritual and make it resident in a certain type of life only, the sense of the supernatural is apt gradually to be lost" ("The Church and the Fiction Writer" 812). As this statement implies, truthful analysis of human iniquity is a vehicle toward spiritual awareness. Although O'Connor utilizes realism extensively, it primarily serves as a catalyst of religious growth.

Instead of looking for the divine in man, as Wordsworth does in poems like "The Old Cumberland Beggar" or "The Discharged Soldier," O'Connor appreciates God's work in the world. This perspective is illustrated in the novel *Wise Blood*. As the protagonist, Hazel Motes, travels throughout the cruel world, denoted by foreboding 666 signs, he obtains benevolent assistance. He first receives subtle warnings that his actions are sinful and require repentance. While driving, for example, he encounters a sign in large white letters that reads, "Woe to the blasphemer and whoremonger! Will hell swallow you up?" (*Wise Blood* 42). The sign alerts Hazel to the sinful nature of his actions, as well as the importance of changing his ways. In addition to covert symbols of the divine, a more overt sign manifests in the form a police officer who pulls Haze to the side of the road. In a surprising twist, the officer says, "Them that don't have a car, don't need a license" and pushes the car off the road, into a ditch (*Wise Blood* 118). While this violent act seems cruel, it has a divine purpose. As in many of O'Connor's works, the aggressive act is used to illustrate God's grace (Raab 42). The police officer prevents escape to a new town so that Hazel can accept both his sinful nature and God's assistance. The officer's question, "Could I give you a lift to where you was going?" is an invitation to accept guidance from a superior power (*Wise Blood* 118).

External symbols of grace within O'Connor's stories are often outwardly ugly, which allows the reader to discover an esoteric divine presence within the wicked world. This view is illustrated by narrative descriptions of peacocks. While these birds may be beautiful to the author, having plumage "suitable for some really regal woman—a Cleopatra or a Clytemnestra—to use to powder her nose" ("The King of the Birds" 835), they are often not appreciated by the average person. Within "The King of the Birds," for example, a mother, uncle, and dairyman all despise these creatures, regarding them as pests which eat valuable crops or flowers. It is from the negative worldly perspective that O'Connor cultivates an appreciation of the unusual and misunderstood, thereby presenting the reader with an opportunity to recognize God's presence. In this and other stories, there is an attempt to elucidate the nature of God's creation, not the inner beauty of humanity.

While both Wordsworth and O'Connor expound divine qualities, spiritual differences impact the manifestation of these qualities within narrative. Wordsworth inductively expounds an ethereal spark embedded within marginalized figures, and reveals divine elements in natural and social surroundings. O'Connor, in contrast, uses a deductive religious paradigm to explain

desolation of the human soul. She further exposes a cruel existence that is surreptitiously tempered by God.

Ultimately, it is idealism which separates Wordsworth's characters from those of O'Connor, who are more mundane. While O'Connor's elucidation of tragic figures and harsh realities make her compositions interesting, it is the application of a Catholic paradigm which makes her work unique. As stated by O'Connor herself, religious beliefs add another "dimension" in which a story may be judged, leading to new inductive truths that an author may never have envisioned ("The Church and the Fiction Writer" 81).

Some have argued that a more "neutral" perspective of O'Connor's work is necessary, whereby items within narrative are separated into *objects*, which are limited by their explicit use, and *things*, which carry multiple meanings (McGuire 508). Though holistic semantic analysis is clearly needed, this "neutral" perspective misses the mark, primarily because it does not identify the divine perspective from which the stories were created. For O'Connor, stories revealed a prominent personal struggle. This difficulty is revealed within her journal entry, which reads:

Dear God, I cannot love Thee the way I want to. You are the slim crescent of a moon that I see and my self is the earth's shadow that keeps me from seeing all the moon. The crescent is very beautiful and perhaps that is all one like I am should or could see; but what I am afraid of, dear God, is that my self shadow will grow so large that it blocks the whole moon, and that I will judge myself by the shadow that is nothing (*Prayer Journal* 3).

The excerpt reveals a personal struggle between man's sinful nature, signified by the earth's shadow, and God's grace, signified by the moonlight. O'Connor clearly has a strong desire to see God, as well as significant feelings of failure. As she struggles to know her creator, she constantly breaks, leading her to the conclusion that "I am one of the weak" (*Prayer Journal* 37). Her characters reveal this almost autobiographical image. As figures struggle to fulfill an emptiness, they flounder until there is both a literal and figurative crash into the divine. Such a struggle for salvation is reminiscent of classic Greek plays, which often end in violence and tragedy (Sharp 19). As the shadows of pride and selfishness rise, characters are presented with either indirect intervention, through opportunities to introspect, or direct intervention, through violent revelation.

Because of inextricable links between O'Connor's divine perspective and the stories that she writes, research suggesting a more "neutral" interpretation of characters and objects appears inadequate. Stories do not merely reveal experimentation and evolution of stylistic conventions, as some researchers have posited ("Early Work" 11). Instead, they are biographical manifestations of a personal struggle to find salvation (O'Connell 351). Furthermore, the mixture of realism and philosophical complexity make O'Connor's works truly exceptional. Her narratives do more than entertain; they lead to existential understanding and spiritual growth.

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