



Good Country People
Flannery O'Connor

Flannery O'Connor: The Moral Voice of the South

All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful.

- Flannery O'Connor

1925-1964

Regarding her emphasis of the grotesque, O'Connor said: "Anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the Northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic."¹

Mary Flannery O'Connor was born in Savannah, Georgia. An important voice in American literature, she wrote two novels and 32 short stories, as well as a number of reviews and commentaries. She was a Southern writer who often wrote in a Southern Gothic style and relied heavily on regional settings and grotesque characters. O'Connor's writing also reflected her own Roman Catholic faith and frequently examined questions of morality and ethics.



Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964)



The only thing that keeps me from being a regional writer is being a Catholic and the only thing that keeps me from being a Catholic writer (in the narrow sense) is being a Southerner. — Flannery O'Connor

Genre: Novel, short story, essay

Movement: Southern Gothic

Awards:

Three O'Henry awards for short fiction

Novels:

1. *Wise Blood* (1952)
2. *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960)

Short Story Collections:

1. *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (1955)
2. *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1965), published posthumously
3. *The Complete Stories* (1971), published posthumously

Literary Context

Southern Gothic is a subgenre of Gothic fiction unique to American literature that takes place exclusively in the American South. It resembles its parent genre in that it relies on supernatural, ironic, or unusual events to guide the plot. It is unlike its parent genre in that it uses these tools not solely for the sake of suspense but to explore social issues and reveal the cultural character of the American South. The Southern Gothic style is one that employs the use of macabre, ironic events to examine the values of the American South.

While English Gothicism closely paralleled the Romantic Movement in literature, frequently focusing on issues of love, sexuality, and the place of reason in human existence, Southern Gothic fiction focuses largely on themes of terror, death, and social interaction.

Certain scholars – such as Leslie Fiedler in *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960) – have identified specifically national concerns apparent in Southern Gothic fiction, particularly the relationships between races and genders.

Literary Context (cont.)

Flannery O'Connor occupies a unique place in the Southern Gothic movement. With the exception of a number of her early stories, O'Connor consistently produced fiction having an implicit, if not a totally explicit, religious world view as an integral element of each work.

As a writer with professedly Christian concerns, O'Connor was, throughout her writing career, convinced that the majority of her audience did not share her basic viewpoint and was, if not openly hostile to it, at best indifferent. In order to reach such an audience, O'Connor felt that she had to make the basic distortions of a world separated from the original, divine plan "appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural." This she accomplished by resorting to the grotesque in her fiction.

To the "true believer," the "ultimate grotesqueness" is found in those post-lapsarian (after the Fall) individuals who ignore their proper relationship to God and either rebel against Him or deny that they have any need to rely upon Him for help in this life. Joy/Hulga Hopewell belongs in this second class.

Literary Context (cont.)

To make these individuals appear grotesque to the secular humanist (one who argues that humans can, by their own ingenuity and wisdom, make a paradise of this earth, if given sufficient time), O'Connor creates, for example, the psychopathic killer, the pious fraud, or the physical or intellectual cripple. This display of what some critics have labeled the "gratuitous grotesque" became for O'Connor the means by which she hoped to capture the attention of her audience. She wrote in a very early essay that "when you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal means of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then 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." For O'Connor, writing was a long, continuous shout.

In *Mystery and Manners*, O'Connor writes, "There is a moment in every great story in which the presence of grace can be felt as it waits to be accepted or rejected even though the reader may not recognize this moment."

Literary Context (cont.)

At another point, she comments, “From my own experience in trying to make stories 'work,' I have discovered that what is needed is an action that is totally unexpected, yet totally believable, and I have found that, for me, this is always an action which indicates that grace has been offered. And frequently it is an action in which the devil has been the unwilling instrument of grace.”

Loosely defined, Illuminating Grace (the type of grace most frequently used by O'Connor in her stories) may be described as a gift, freely given by God, which is designed to enlighten the minds of people and help them toward eternal life. It may take the form of some natural mental experience, such as a dream or viewing a beautiful sunset, or of some experience imposed from outside the individual — for example, from hearing a sermon or from experiencing an intense joy, a sorrow, or some other shock.

Literary Context (cont.)

Man, having been given free will, may, according to the Catholic position, elect not to accept the gift of grace, as opposed to a Calvinist position, which argues for a concept of Irresistible Grace — that is, man cannot reject God's grace when it is given to him. Even though O'Connor notes that she looks for the moment “in which the presence of grace can be felt as it waits to be accepted or rejected,” one should not assume that she is attempting to pass judgment on the ultimate fate of her characters. That, from an orthodox point of view, is not possible for man to do.

Even though O'Connor's vision was essentially religious, she chose to present it from a primarily comic or grotesque perspective.



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Analysis

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Characters

- **Mrs. Freeman** – Woman who lives next door to Mrs. Hopewell and works for Mrs. Hopewell as a tenant farmer
- **Glynese Freeman** – Mrs. Freeman’s daughter, eighteen “with many admirers”
- **Carramae Freeman** – Mrs. Freeman’s daughter, fifteen but married and pregnant
- **Mrs. Hopewell** – A divorcée, owner of a farm, and the mother of Joy/Hulga
- **Joy/Hulga Hopewell** – Mrs. Hopewell’s thirty-two-year-old daughter with a PhD and a wooden leg
- **Manley Pointer** – A door-to-door Bible salesman

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Style

This story is divided into four rather distinct sections which help emphasize the relationships between the four central characters. By dividing the story into four loosely distinct sections, O'Connor is able to establish subtle *parallels* between the characters of Mrs. Freeman and Manley Pointer and between Mrs. Hopewell and her daughter, Joy/Hulga, while at the same time providing details which appear to emphasize the *different facets* of the four individual characters.

For example, O'Connor uses the day of Joy's/Hulga's "enlightenment" in order to create parallels between Mrs. Freeman and Manley Pointer, while the flashbacks to the events of the previous day establish the parallels which exist between Joy/Hulga and her mother.

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Setting

“Good Country People” takes place on a tenant farm in Georgia, which O’Connor uses to establish a worldview that is narrow as well as hierarchical, for Mrs. Hopewell owns the farm while Mrs. Freeman works on it, appropriately entering Mrs. Hopewell’s house by way of the kitchen door. Dialect contributes to a verisimilitude of setting. For example, a man’s comment about Mrs. Freeman, “If she don’t get there before the dust settles, you can bet she’s dead,” captures the idiom of the rural South. When Manley Pointer tells Mrs. Hopewell, “I know you believe in Christian service,” he communicates a limited Christianity based on words rather than true belief, which is important to people who live there. Manley’s walking across the meadow at the end of the story provides another detail of setting. When she sees him, Mrs. Freeman observes that “he must have been selling [Bibles] to the Negroes back in” the woods behind Mrs. Hopewell’s farm, linking social hierarchy, race, and religion to the rural South of the 1950s.

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Setting (cont.)

Within this larger setting are two others: Mrs. Hopewell's house, especially the kitchen, where the story begins, and the property beyond the gate of the house, where Manley seduces Joy/Hulga. Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman carry on "their most important business in the kitchen at breakfast." The kitchen, generally thought of as the heart of a home, in this story does not provide such symbolic sustenance because of the insipid talk between the women when they visit there. The fact that Joy/Hulga has "a bad heart" reinforces this emptiness in the Hopewell kitchen. The setting is significant, too, because it is a site of female domesticity, and this is a story about women without men—until, that is, Manley Pointer comes to sell Bibles. His aggressive intrusion into this female space is demonstrated when he falls "forward into her hall" as Mrs. Hopewell allows him into her home. The garden outside the kitchen is also significant, for here the women pull out "evil-smelling onions" when they see Pointer walk off into the distance, as if eradicating his evil in essence from their territory.

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Setting (cont.)

Outside the safety of the home, Joy/Hulga makes a rendezvous with Pointer. She meets him at the gate; walks across the pasture; climbs a ladder to the loft; and from there watches him walk away after he kisses her, removes her wooden leg, and ultimately takes it with him when he leaves. All of these details of place carry meaning. The gate symbolizes Joy's/Hulga's introduction to the outside world, and the ladder that leads to the loft signifies the arrogance of her sense of intellectual superiority, her presumption that she is Manley's (and everyone's) better – an attitude that proves to be her demise as the story continues.

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Setting (cont.)

O'Connor uses Joy's/Hulga's view of the setting as a symbol of her transformation as a result of her encounter with Manley Pointer. From the loft, while still wearing her glasses (symbolizing an intellectual way of seeing), she looks to a sky that is "cloudless and cold blue" and later "hollow," which together represent her philosophy that life has no meaning. However, after Manley removes her glasses, the world looks distorted, unfamiliar. The lakes below appear "green [and] swelling," and when he leaves her, she sees him "struggling successfully over the green speckled lake." The water in both descriptions connotes cleansing and renewal but the greenness indicates this water is not fresh but rather contaminated by the serpent-like quality of Manley, for he, though evil, nonetheless saves Hulga by taking away her false belief in nothing. This use of setting is reinforced with her view of Manley walking across the lake, which alludes to yet inverts the miracle of Jesus walking on water.

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Conflict

- **External** - Man vs. Man (Mother vs. Daughter)
 1. Joy's/Hulga's Ph.D. degree in philosophy creates a major problem between the two women. Mrs. Hopewell thinks that girls should go to school and have a good time — but her daughter has attained the ultimate educational degree, yet education did not "bring her out"; privately, Mrs. Hopewell is glad that there is "no more excuse for [Hulga] to go to school again." Mrs. Hopewell would like to brag about her daughter, as she can brag about Mrs. Freeman's daughters, but bragging about Joy/Hulga is next to impossible. Mrs. Hopewell can't say, "My daughter is a philosopher." That statement, as Mrs. Hopewell knows, is something that "ended with the Greeks and Romans."
 2. Joy's/Hulga's manner of dress also contributes to the vast misunderstanding that exists between the two women. Mrs. Hopewell thinks that her daughter's wearing "a six-year-old skirt and a yellow sweat shirt with a faded cowboy on a horse embossed on it" is idiotic, proof that despite the Ph.D. and her name change, she is "still a child."

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Conflict (cont.)

3. In addition to wearing inappropriate clothes, the name change (from "Joy" to "Hulga") cut such a wound into Mrs. Hopewell that she will never entirely heal. To change one's name from "Joy" to "Hulga," according to Mrs. Hopewell, was an act of ridiculously immature rebellion. Mrs. Hopewell is convinced that Joy pondered until she "hit upon the ugliest name in any language" and then legally changed her name.
4. The chasm between the two women is even further deepened by Mrs. Hopewell's attitude toward the Freeman girls — as opposed to her attitude toward Joy/Hulga. Mrs. Hopewell likes to praise Glynese and Carramae. In contrast, Mrs. Hopewell is deeply ashamed of Joy/Hulga.
5. As a result, Joy/Hulga withdraws and decides not to attempt any meaningful relationship with her mother. This is apparent in the scene where O'Connor focuses on Joy's/Hulga's eyes. Hulga's eyes, she says, are "icy blue, with the look of someone who has achieved blindness by an act of will and means to keep it."

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Irony

- **Names**
 1. Hopewell – The name characterizes both the mother and her daughter. Both women are individuals who simplistically believe that what is wanted can be had although each of them is, in her own way, blind to the world as it really exists. Both women fail to see that the world (because it is a fallen world) is a mixture of good *and* evil. This misperception leads them to assume that the world is much simpler than it actually is. Because both Hulga and her mother have accepted this false view of reality, each of them "hopes well" to tailor that world to meet her own needs — Mrs. Hopewell by living in a world where clichés operate as truth, and Hulga by insisting that there is nothing behind, or beyond, the surface world.
 2. Mrs. Freeman – She is a tenant farmer with “loose lips” (gossips freely), in other words, a “free-woman.”
 3. Manley Pointer – On one level, his name is a pun on his appearance. He is described as skinny, not manly. The name comes to point out, on another level, the depths to which humanity might descend if it follows only its "manly" nature.

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Irony (cont.)

- **Dramatic irony**
 1. Although Joy/Hulga is educated and highly intelligent, she has no common sense, which leads to her trying to seduce Manley.
 2. Manley comes prepared for this event and ends up stealing her prosthetic leg.
- **“Good country” philosophy** – "It takes all kinds to make the world," and "Everybody is different."
 1. Mrs. Hopewell cannot reconcile herself to a daughter who is “different.”
 2. Mrs. Hopewell considers Hulga's acts of rebellion to be little more than pranks of an immature mind.

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Themes & Symbolism

- **Innocence vs. experience**

Joy/Hulga does not understand herself as innocent; indeed, she considers herself to be quite experienced because her education has given her access to philosophers such as Nietzsche, whose words she underlines with a blue pencil: “science wishes to know nothing of nothing.” Significantly, Manley Pointer wears a blue suit and lines his suitcase of Bibles with blue, thus linking her nihilism to his evil masquerading as innocence. In denying God and asserting the primacy of Nothing, Joy/Hulga lacks the ability to recognize Manley for who he is because, “in her economy,” evil has no more meaning than God has. This “innocent” view allows Manley to spiritually rape her, symbolized by him taking her wooden leg. When she pleads, “Aren’t you just good country people?” he replies, “I hope you don’t think that I believe in that crap! I may sell Bibles but I know which end is up and I wasn’t born yesterday and I know where I’m going!” This last word is deeply ironic, for without a leg—and without a soul – Joy/Hulga can go nowhere. If at the beginning she considers herself an intellectual Eve about to seduce an innocent Adam, by the end of the story Adam reveals himself as evil incarnate – Satan himself, perhaps. Through him she falls into the world of experience, gaining the knowledge that evil does indeed exist, that there is meaning beyond the Nothing she embraced at the beginning of the story.

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Themes & Symbolism (cont.)

- **Grace, Redemption and the Grotesque**

As with many of O'Connor's stories, in "Good Country People" the protagonist achieves the possibility of redemption through an act of violence perpetuated by evil, which in this story is embodied in Manley Pointer. Joy/Hulga's wooden leg makes her grotesque, but more grotesque is what that symbolizes: her soul's lacking faith. When Manley steals her leg, he contributes to the work of God because doing so provides Joy/Hulga with the opportunity to accept grace and spiritually grow from the humiliating position in which Manley leaves her. O'Connor suggests the possibilities offered by the presence of evil in the world when depicting Manley "disappearing down the hole" in the loft and then "struggling successfully over the green speckled lake" as he leaves Joy/Hulga "sitting on the straw in the dusty sunlight." In these images, Manley is both devil and Jesus, and Joy/Hulga is in a liminal space of possibility.

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Themes & Symbolism (cont.)

- **Identity**

Having lost her leg in a hunting accident when she was ten, Joy/Hulga is crippled emotionally as much as she is physically, her heart problem serving to symbolize this inner grief. To compensate, Joy/Hulga becomes an intellectual, but this adds to her alienation because it enables her to imagine herself as better than others. Indeed, she wants to make herself as unpleasant as possible, stomping about and being rude to everyone. She resents her mother not only because of her mother's simplistic view of life but also because her mother does not accept her for who she is. "If you want me, here I am—LIKE I AM," Hulga defiantly tells her. Changing her name shows this hostility and provides a way of reinventing herself. "One of her major triumphs," the narrator says, "was that her mother had not been able to turn her dust into Joy, but the greater one was that she had been able to turn it herself into Hulga." Unlike her mother, Joy/Hulga does not "hope well" because her accident, in taking away her leg, also took her faith and hope. Mrs. Hopewell's inability to see life as anything but simple also prevents her from understanding her daughter for the complex person she is.