

American Literature & Culture
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Flannery O'Connor A Brief Overview (Lecture 13b)

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Good morning friends and welcome to this lecture on Flannery O'Connor, the American short story writer who lived between 1925 and 1964, we are soon going to start with her *Good Country People*. So she was born in Savannah, Georgia. She was the only child of Regina Cline and Edward Francis O'Connor. Edward O'Connor owned and operated the Dixie Realty Company as well as its extension, the Dixie Construction Company. Young Flannery travelled from Savannah to other parts of that part of United States to stay at her mother's ancestral home each summer. When in 1937, Edward O'Connor developed disseminated lupus, a kind of disease, the family moved to Milledgeville permanently.

That is the place which they would often spend their summers. In 1941 her father died and she attended Peabody High School and graduated from Georgia State College for Women in 1945. In college she developed a passion for reading and writing. She was also interesting in drawing and cartooning, most of which was satire of college life. She later attended School for Writers headed by Paul Engle at Iowa University where her writing career truly began. Here she received a scholarship in journalism and took up courses in literature, advanced drawing, American political cartooning, magazine writing and advertising. In 1946 while still

a student, her first story *The Geranium* was published in *Accent Magazine*. In 1947, she received her Masters in Fine Arts from the University of Iowa.

Later she garnered a recommendation for a place in Yaddo Writers Colony in Saratoga Springs, New York where she lived until the spring of 1949. Here she became a part of a group of 15 artists including poet Robert Lowell and writer Malcolm Cowley. From 1949 to 50, Connor worked on her first novel, *Wise Blood* leaving briefly New York City and then moving to Connecticut to live with Robert Fitzgerald family where in December of 1950, Flannery O'Connor developed the same disease her father had, disseminated lupus. In 1951, she and her mother moved back to a dairy farm called Andalusia which was located 5 miles outside of Milledgeville.

Her relation with her mother inspired her writing and her mother Regina understood that she provided some characteristics of farm women of her daughter's story. Despite the serious physical symptoms of her illness, O'Connor remained mentally active and began working on the stories. She published her stories collection in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories* in 1955 and *The Violent Bear It Away*, her second novel in 1960. In 1963, her health condition became worse and she began to experience prolonged periods of weakness coupled with increasingly frequent fainting spells.

However she wrote and reviewed the stories that would later appear in her last collection *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. In February 1964, she underwent a surgery to remove the tumor which was believed to be the cause of her severe anemia. The surgery aggravated her lupus and she fell severely ill. Even at that point, O'Connor worked diligently to complete 3 more stories for her final collection, *Revelation*, *Judgment Day* and *Parker's Back*. She died in 1964 in Georgia. She has received O. Henry Awards for several of her short stories; particularly *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*, *A Circle in the Fire*, *Greenleaf*, *Everything That Rises Must Converge* and *Revelation*.

Coming to her milieu; O'Connor's consistent passion for order places her position central to the Southern Literary tradition. The leading literary spokesman for the South has shared the discomfort that they experiences in a modern, mechanized scientifically oriented world. All artists felt hunger for meaning a need for a structure and rage for an order in existence. They

supported Southern way of life as opposed to what may be called as American or prevailing way. The common themes that appeared in the Southern literature are slavery, The American Civil War, Reconstruction, the conservative culture in the south, significance of family, religion and community in one's personal and social life, south's troubled history and racial issues.

The use of Southern dialect also continually appeared in the Southern Literature. The Southerners tended to impose a desire for a social structure that reflects modern principles. O'Connor hailed from Irish-Catholic family. Being a Southerner and Catholic contributed to her writing and she deeply identified with Southern fundamentalists. According to her, a Catholic novelist will not see human beings as inherently good or evil but will see them rather as incomplete. Christ and the devil become the centers of good and evil. In O'Connor's fiction, we see a preoccupation with Christ figure that is scarcely equaled by her contemporaries. Her vision of a Southern Catholic writer is brought upon in detail in essays such as *The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South* published in 1963 and *The Church and the Fiction Writer*.

Coming to her writing style, it has been compared to that of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Emily Dickinson. Being a Southern writer most of O'Connor's characters were thought to be a little off kilter. Ok and as we have seen while we are talking of short stories, she is also the master of the macabre and the grotesque. In her essay, *Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction* which was published in 1960, he says, in these grotesque works we find that the writer has made alive some experience which we are not accustomed to observe every day. or which the ordinary man may never experience in his ordinary life.

The connections which are either would expect the customary kind of realist writing seem to be ignored. So these are the skips and gaps. Grotesque characters may be amusing but that is not their primary function. They see meaning beyond the visible. The characters have an inner coherence. So all these things, you should keep in mind while we discuss the *Good Country People*. If not the characters have an inner coherence, if not always a coherence to their social framework, these are important points to remember. And also remember their fictional qualities lean away from typical social patterns towards mystery and the unexpected which is so important in *Good Country People*, to understand in *Good Country People*.

Ok, so her major works include *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear It Away*, it is a, these are two novels. Then she has published two story collections, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find and other Stories*, and *Everything That Rises Must Converge* and then, these and other writings have been published as *The Complete Short Stories*. Connors collected letters, *The Habit of Being*, it was published in 1979, gave a wider understanding about the author and her works. Another work *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* includes essays and other writings that contribute to an ongoing dialog about art and religion and the collected works include novels, , the collected works which was published in 1988, it includes novels and stories along with representative letters and essays and a few previously unpublished stories published in the Library of America edition.

Talking about *The Geranium* which was published in 1947, this was her first professional publication. It is a title and a first story of Master of Fine Art thesis. *The Geranium, A Collection of Short Stories*, that's what the thesis was called. The story deals with Old Dudley's attitude towards race and illustrates the ways the old Southern white man can both refuse to be held by strange black man next door but at the same time, go fishing with a black man in the south he feels comfortable as a friend. O'Connor suggests that if the barriers of stereotyping and racial ignorance could be broken down, and relationship on a, on a one-to-one basis be encouraged, racism would have had a shorter life in America.

Her stories, *The Artificial Nigger* and *Judgment Day* also deals, also deal with the themes of racial tensions. In *Wise Blood*, 1952, this is the first novel that was published by Harcourt Brace, the publisher in 1952. It is dedicated to her mother Regina. And few chapters were reworks from stories that were previously published namely *The Peeler*, *The Enoch* and *The Gorilla* and *The Train*. The novel concerns are returning World War II veterans who haunted by a lifelong crisis of faith, resolves to form an anti-religious ministry in an eccentric Southern town. The themes explored in this novel are freedom, free will, life and death, and the inevitability of belief.

And in *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories*, 1955, again published by Harcourt Brace, the title is, was taken from the Blues song, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* written by Eddie Green and popularized by the singer, Bessie Smith in 1927. The subjects of the short

stories range from baptism to serial killers to human greed and exploitation. *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* is a comic story with tragic ending. The story begins with a family travelling from Atlanta to Florida on vacation with a grandmother. It deals with good and evil and actions of grace, like the author's other works as well. Things, subject matter is quite relevant because she keeps on, she was pre-occupied with this kind of subject matter.

The story is told from third person limited omniscient perspective and it comments on the difficulty of finding and defining goodness in a confused world, posing interpretive challenges to the readers. In 1954, she also wrote *The Displaced Person*. It is the last and longest of the 10 stories in the collection *A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories*. The story is divided into 3 parts and within 2 of these number parts are also section breaks as is customary with Flannery O'Connor. She introduces her characters in the first section. The reader is also introduced to the peacock, to a peacock who becomes an important character of the story.

The story points out the problems of ignorance and the distrust among people from countries others than their own; the language seems to be a particular concern with the people on the farm and the foreigners. The story is set in the post World War context where displaced person was official designation for anyone from Europe, Russia, you know people who were Jewish in origin. These were the refugees or the displaced people. There are several references and allusions to the war and the concentration camps, several of these involve piles of bodies which is the ultimate displaced bodies. The setting of the story is closely associated with Andalusia that was O'Connor's farm.

A Circle in the Fire appeared in *Kenyon Review*, 1954 and Prize story in 1955, it takes place on a Georgia Farm and involves outsiders who arrive mysteriously and disrupt the usually uneventful farm life. O'Connor employs symbolism and literary and biblical allusions in the story. The story's title and the final scene is taken from the book of Daniel from the Bible, in which the tyrannical king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar throws 3 Jewish boys into a fiery furnace, and then coming to *Good Country People*; that is our story. At the center of story is Joy, Ok also Hulga and she is a 32 year old woman, she has a PhD and she also has an artificial leg.

And her encounter with a mysterious stranger, so this is a common theme in most of her works, a mysterious stranger or group of people arriving on the scene and disrupting the relative calm of the place, of any place. And then it deals with the different possibilities for, understanding how people negotiate with the world and interpret each other's actions. She also depicts the racial or radical conflicts between the world view of the unsophisticated farm people and the university formed intellectuals who in their pride dismiss the possibility of grace and blind themselves to the ways of the world. her story, *Everything That Rises Must Converge* was published in 1965 and it contains an introduction by Robert Fitzgerald.

The title expresses her constant concern with man's slow participation in redemption. The title is taken from the writings of Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's works which she had been reading since early 1961 and whose ideas are highly relevant to the particular meaning of her sacramental view. The title story that appeared in *New World Writing* in 1961, won the O' Henry Memorial Award. The story had an O. Henry twist. This is a typical term used to denote an unexpected conclusion or climax, the way it is done in O. Henry's stories. It is said, during the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement when the South was still segregated and it is told again from a third person's point of view.

The story highlights longing for love, the struggle between races, the region divided between old and new and a mother and son who even in their seeming differences, care for each other. It has several inter-related themes, the fallen nature of the modern world, the struggle for social class and status, morals, morality and moral responsibility, racism in the South, impact of integration in the South, intellectualism and elitism, knowledge and ignorance, manipulation of others, self-deception and self understanding, thinking and acting the ideal and the real and the appearance and the reality.

Letters of Flannery O'Connor, it is *The Habit of Being* which was published in 1979 and edited by her friend Sally Fitzgerald. the title of the collection comes from Fitzgerald says that O'Connor deliberately cultivated a habit of art of living in the world which, Fitzgerald terms says a habit of being. The Volume won National Books Critics Circle Special Award in 1979. Talking about *Revelation* in 1964, it is the last story to appear separately before O'Connor's death in 1964, the same year; It was published in the Spring issue of the *Sewanee Review*.

At the center of the story is Ruby Turpin, an overweight middle class white woman obsessed with class consciousness and racial relations. She forms O'Connor's strong commentary and embodies a bigoted Southern culture consumed by notions of, prefixed notions of races and class. The story provides a window into her personality, her relationships, views about O'Connor's works and views on topics such as literature, literary analysis, aesthetics, politics, illnesses, spirituality and most importantly the Catholic Church. So, many people have seen this work as autobiography, it has a strong autobiographical references and then it is also, it can also be seen as a kind of literary criticism and opinion pieces.

So what is her legacy? Her legacy is embodied in her works of fiction, essays, reviews and letters. In 1946 the library staff at Ina Dillard Russell Library of Georgia College and University established a Flannery O'Connor collection. It holds more than 6000 manuscripts and 700 books from the author's personal library making it one of the premium collection of the author's works. The Flannery O'Connor and Andalusia Foundation Incorporated was established in 2001 to promote interest in the study of the author and *Wise Blood* was made into a movie in 1979. The movie was directed by John Huston.

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Reference

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Further Readings

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- Orvell, Miles. *Flannery O'Connor An Introduction*. University Press Of Mississippi. London:1991. print.
- Champoin, Lairie Ed. *American Woman Writers 1900 – 1945: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Source Book*. Greenwood Press. USA:2000. print.

Further readings American Women Writers Fact on File by Carol Kort, Miles Orvell's Flannery O'Connor An Introduction, and American, it should be Women Writers, not Woman Writers, Women Writers edited by Lairie Champoin.

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So thank you very much and for our next class, we will start with Good Country People.